

# PC GAMER<sup>®</sup>

FIRST LOOK

## TOTAL WAR: ROME REMASTERED

A STRATEGY CLASSIC  
RETURNS IN STYLE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

# GENSHIN IMPACT

THE PHENOMENON  
THAT NO ONE  
SAW COMING

MIND  
CONTROL

Could Gabe Newell  
really control  
our thoughts?

FUTURE

ISSUE 356



HARDWARE

## MECHANICAL KEYBOARDS

TIME TO FIND A BOARD  
YOU CAN CLICK WITH



## MORTAL KOMBAT

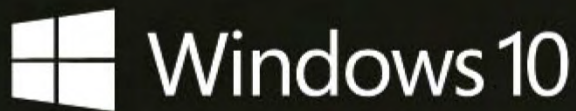
A FILM ADAPTATION  
THAT'S GOT GUTS



## ALIENS: FIRETEAM

YEP, IT'S LEFT 4 DEAD  
WITH XENOMORPHS





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**PC GAMER**

#356 MAY 2021

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# “HOW DID GENSHIN IMPACT BECOME SUCH A PHENOMENON?”



OK, maybe this isn't a typical PC Gamer cover – but if so, that's just the latest convention Chinese free-to-play RPG *Genshin Impact* has smashed. You might not be playing it, you might not have even heard of it, but it's one of the biggest mega hits in PC gaming right now. It's got more players than *Counter-Strike*, more momentum than *Fortnite*, and some seriously

ambitious plans for the future ahead.

How did *Genshin Impact* become such a phenomenon? That's the question we've investigated for our cover feature, uncovering a story of zombies, waifus, and a group of nerds who want to save the world...

**ROBIN VALENTINE**  
Specialist in  
Expecting the unexpected

**Twitter**  
[@robinlvalentine](https://twitter.com/robinlvalentine)

**This month**  
Got a little flustered at this picture of himself as an anime lady.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**  
PRINT EDITOR  
[robin.valentine@futurenet.com](mailto:robin.valentine@futurenet.com)

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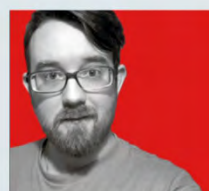
## The PC Gamer team



**ANDY KELLY**  
Specialist in  
Alien 3

**Twitter**  
[@ultrabrilliant](https://twitter.com/ultrabrilliant)

**This month**  
Found a new excuse to go on about how much he loves those aliens whose heads look like rude bits.



**FRASER BROWN**  
Specialist in  
Forgetting realms

**Twitter**  
[@FraserIBrown](https://twitter.com/FraserIBrown)

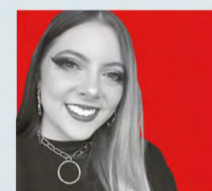
**This month**  
Finally figured out how to spell 'Drizzt' and 'Catti-Brie' properly. Just in time.



**STEVEN MESSNER**  
Specialist in  
Gacha journalism

**Twitter**  
[@stevenmessner](https://twitter.com/stevenmessner)

**This month**  
Kept opening PC Gamer loot boxes until an epic *Genshin Impact* cover feature dropped.



**MOLLIE TAYLOR**  
Specialist in  
Tree speech

**Twitter**  
[@mollietayy](https://twitter.com/mollietayy)

**This month**  
Learned how a videogame could plant a million real trees. Also assigned birds human personalities.



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# MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



It's wild to think of Microsoft owning *Doom*, but this is the world we live in now. For his part, John Carmack just hopes he gets the chance to work on some of id's old IPs.

## A MATCH MADE IN SKYRIM

Bethesda officially joins Microsoft

**A**fter getting the approval of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission and the European Union Commission in March, Microsoft has now officially announced that the acquisition of ZeniMax Media, owner of Bethesda, is complete.

Xbox head Phil Spencer welcomed the eight studios under ZeniMax (id Software, Bethesda, ZeniMax Online

Studios, Arkane, MachineGames, Tango Gameworks, Alpha Dog and Roundhouse Studios) and said it was “an honour” to have them join the team. A selective list of just some of the game series Microsoft has

**DOWN THE ROAD  
THEY WILL PRODUCE  
GAMES THAT ARE  
EXCLUSIVES**

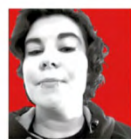
acquired includes *Doom*, *Dishonored*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, *Prey*, *Quake*, *Rage*, *Starfield*, *Wolfenstein*, and *The Evil Within*.

The reaction of some Bethesda fans to this acquisition, which has been known about for some time, has been fearful: mainly because of Microsoft's history with studios like the now-defunct Lionhead. Spencer thus went out of his way to emphasise it was “vitally important that Bethesda continues making games the way it always has”, and added that Xbox wants to help



MISUNDERSTOOD NOODLES

## SAVING THE TREES



Sneki Snek, Razer's friendly, mascot, has finally come into being. With each purchase equating to ten trees saved, Razer is on the path to conserving one million trees together with Conservation International. The design evolves with every milestone reached, from plushies to headrests. ■ **KW**

FROM RUSSIA WITH TRUCKS

## ETS2'S NEW EXPANSION



*Euro Truck Simulator 2*, is having a big year. Not only is the Iberian peninsula being added to the game, but a new Russia expansion has also been announced. This will add new roads to the map going as far as the Volga river. ■ **AK**



GOING POTTY

## PRODUCER FLUNKS OUT



*Hogwarts Legacy* was dealt a massive blow after it was discovered the game's lead producer had a years-long side gig as an anti-social-justice YouTuber. The producer has since parted ways with the studio, though says he remains on "good terms" with Avalanche and WB Games. ■ **NC**



**ABOVE:** An idea of the range of games that are now under the Microsoft umbrella. Looks like it couldn't find room for *Blinx the Time Sweeper*.

**BOTTOM:** The most immediate fallout from the deal is Bethesda's games adding to the value of Game Pass, which is already a pretty great deal.

"make future Bethesda titles the biggest and most popular games in their history".

### 'SOFT REBOOT

The immediate impact of this will be with these studios' games finding their way to Microsoft's Game Pass service, while down the road they will begin producing games that are exclusives, though what that word means is pretty flexible these days when it comes to PC. "Gamers should know that Xbox consoles, PC, and Game Pass will be the best place to experience new Bethesda games, including some new titles in the future that will be exclusive to Xbox and PC players," said Spencer.

The completion of the deal had a tinge of sadness, coming as it did shortly after the death of ZeniMax Media co-founder Robert A Altman. Spencer called Altman a "close friend" who "believed deeply in the power of gaming". He also said, "I know that his spirit will live on in the shared work we do and motivate us to make this partnership all he envisioned."

Microsoft's false starts in PC gaming over the years are many, from the unmitigated disaster that was Games for Windows Live, to its ill-advised focus on service games in the early 2010s. But over the last decade it has been making big investments in its firstparty strength, and is combining this with a strategy of cross-platform releases and the value proposition of Game Pass. Zenimax and its many great studios is the biggest and riskiest investment in Microsoft Game Studios' history: let's hope it doesn't screw things up. **Mollie Taylor, Rich Stanton**



## Highs & Lows



### HIGHS

#### Valheim

The Early Access hit has reached five million sales and counting.

#### GTA Online

A modder managed to reduce *GTA's* loading times by 70%, earning him a \$10k bounty from Rockstar.

#### Microsoft Mesh

Microsoft showed off Microsoft Mesh, an incredible AR HoloLens environment where folk talk to holograms of one another.

### Dogg gone

Snoop Dogg streamed *Madden* on Twitch, quit after 14 mins, but left his stream running for seven hours.

#### Fail of Duty

Police arrested an escaped prisoner when he emerged from hiding to buy the latest *Call of Duty* game.

#### Rotten Apple

Apple's been trying to get Steam data. A judge said Apple has "salted the Earth with subpoenas", but Valve has to release it anyway.

### LOWS





# The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

**T**his month, *The Spy* was struck by the terrifying realisation that broadcasting your exploits each month, in print, for a magazine sold in shops across the country, is actually terrible spycraft. Is this why *The Spy* has never been headhunted by a government agency, or even a morally questionable clandestine mercenary outfit, and has instead spent the last couple of decades pilfering games industry secrets each month, to deadline? Why did nobody alert *The Spy* to this massive blunder?

Considering this, maybe author George R R Martin is the opposite of *The Spy*. Where *The Spy* has spent too long sharing information that shouldn't see the light of day, the *Game of Thrones* author seemingly loves to *not* share information that should. The fifth book in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series released back in 2011, meaning fans have been waiting nearly a decade for the series' continuation. And yet, despite that, Martin also has myriad other projects on the go, not least of which is *Elden Ring*, a videogame collaboration with FromSoftware that is somehow *also* making its fans wait an absolute age for some new information.

## FLOPPY WIENERS

Since its announcement back in 2019, fans have been

eagerly waiting for publisher Bandai Namco to release almost anything else about the game beyond its title and creative leads. And yet, nothing. The situation grew so desperate that the *Elden Ring* subreddit community transformed into a performative art project in which members created fictional lore, scenarios, and bosses, and then further creating memes about their creations.

Picture, then, the celebration back in early March when some leaked footage began to circulate. The quality isn't great – it's not direct capture for one thing, but rather a phone camera pointed at an angled screen that's showing a partial section of a trailer covered in watermarks. But still: it's something.

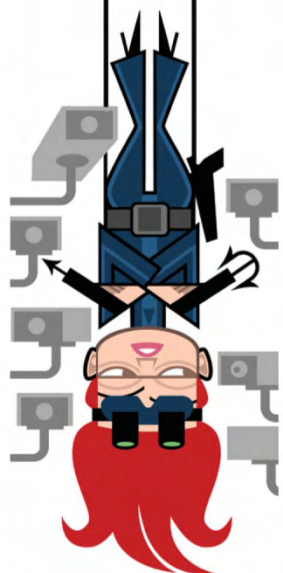
Based on the footage, *Elden Ring* is for sure a FromSoft game. It features lumbering giants pulling carts, overwrought NPCs hamming up lines like "Oh! You tragic thing!", and caverns and ruins and all that good stuff. There's a bit with a monstrous swordsman posing in front of a prominent moon, and another bit where the player character slowly and laboriously pushes open a massive door. There is a dragon of course.

As for when any of this will be officially unveiled, there is, of course, no date. In fact, there's even the suggestion that this leak has delayed an official reveal, as Bandai Namco works to find out how this happened, and stop it from happening ever again. This is what those in the business call an irony, one made all the more bitter by rumours that the game as a whole has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Still, maybe the subreddit was on the right track after all. If you were to write down everything you assumed would be true of a collaboration between the makers of *Dark Souls* and George R R Martin, there's every chance it would feature a lot of what exists in this footage. And maybe *The Spy* was on the right track after all. Once you've established a pattern of writing everything down,

you can write *anything* down, and people will struggle to discern the truth from the fiction. *The Spy* is going to space now, and you can't actually prove whether or not that's true. Spy out. ■  
*The Spy*

## BASED ON THE FOOTAGE, ELDEN RING IS FOR SURE A FROMSOFT GAME



**THE SPY**  
The Spy can't be talked into turning back.

## This month in... 2011



**1** It's not particularly notable that this issue featured three MMOs – that was just the way of things in the early 2010s. What is notable is that all three of them still exist. *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Guild Wars 2* and, yes, even *Rift*, are all games you can play to this day. An unprecedented coincidence for the most turbulent of genres.

**ISSUE**  
226, May 2011  
**ON THE COVER**  
*Star Wars: The Old Republic*  
**IN THE CINEMAS**  
Source Code

**2** *Crysis* was a good PC game with a few problems that could have easily been addressed by a sequel. Alas, *Crysis 2* was much less interesting.



**3** Richard Cobbett takes us on a tour of the best deals on Steam. And even ten years ago – with far fewer games available on Valve's store – there's a lot packed into this eight page feature, from classics like *The Fallout Collection* and *The Last Express* to more recent (at the time) gems like *BioShock 2* and *Torchlight*.





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- Robust build quality

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- 68 grams extreme lightweight

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- ROCCAT® Titan Switch Optical
- Heat-treated 100% pure PTFE glides
- ROCCAT® PhantomFlex cable



# Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Alba's a jack-of-all-trades – vet, carpenter, photographer, litter picker, and errand girl.

## BRANCHING OUT

How **ALBA: A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE** is making change in the real world

**E**verybody understands trees,” says Maria Sayans, CEO of Ustwo games. It’s maybe not the kind of pitch we’re used to hearing from developers, but that sentiment does get to the roots of Ustwo’s mission. In just two months this indie developer has helped plant more than half a million trees with its 2020 release *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure*.

The game follows a young girl visiting her grandparents on a Mediterranean island, lush with gorgeous nature and wildlife. The idea initially came from art director David Fernández Huerta’s love of bird watching. “You’re spotting the animals and you’re like ‘Oh my God, it flew away,’” says lead designer Mishal Mistry. “OK, well, maybe I’ll just wait for it to fly back and take another picture’. And so [Huerta’s] like ‘This feels like a game, why don’t we try making a game out of it?’”

In order to capture the beauty of nature in the most accurate way possible, the team would go out on bird watching trips together – something that Mistry had never been interested in before. “I think we did two or three over the course of the project... it was incredible, because it was transformative for all of us.”

That chilled-out joy of discovery really comes through in *Alba*. Playing it is a truly tranquil experience,

peacefully skipping around and soaking in the lush Spanish landscape. But what initially presents itself as a game that’s just about snapping pictures of birds becomes a bigger narrative shaped around the environment and our treatment of it.

“You spend your time cataloguing the wildlife, taking pictures of animals and enjoying nature,” explains Mistry. “But as you do that, you kind of realise there’s more stuff going on on the island. Some stuff is in disrepair, and you start learning about the effect of humans on nature and back and forth. And eventually, you realise the whole island is in jeopardy.”

### TREE-MENDOUS

So how does all this lead into planting trees in the real world? Studio head Sayans says that initially Ustwo games was looking for a way to offset its carbon footprint. The studio is already a B-corp, a for-profit business that meets the highest standards of environmental accountability. Sayans says they wanted to use their position to make a bigger impact, and began talking with organisations including Count Us In and the United Nations.

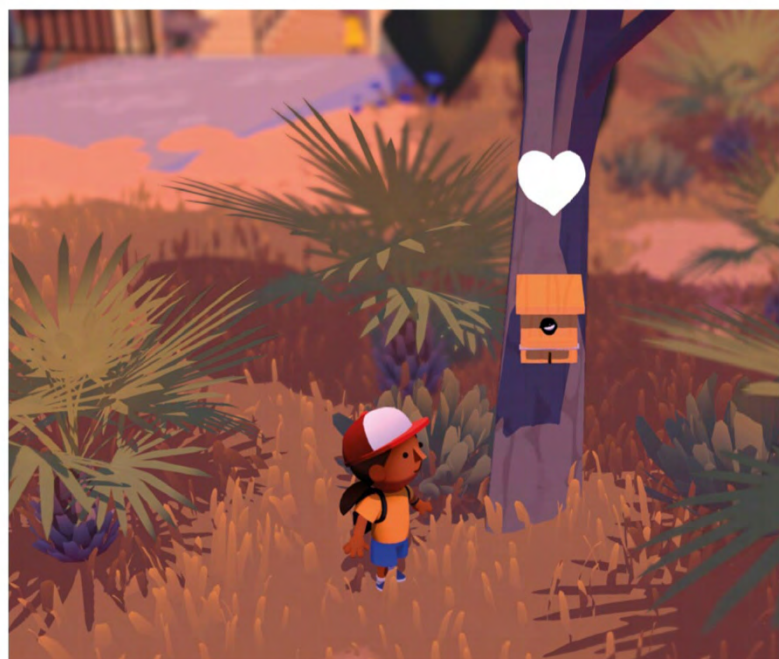
These conversations eventually lead Ustwo games to Ecologi, an organisation dedicated to reducing the planet’s carbon footprint and fighting climate change through reforestation projects.



### Planting prowess

Where do all the trees go? Ecologi and Ustwo games have split the seedlings across three different reforestation projects. The first is a mangrove planting project in Madagascar. The other two are standard reforestation projects, one in Mozambique and the other in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in Nicaragua.





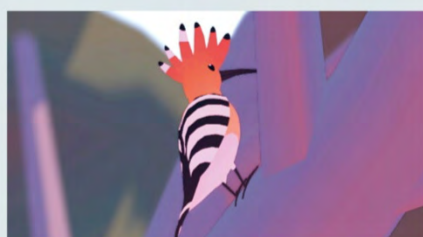
**FAR LEFT:** *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* celebrates even the smallest of victories, like repairing a birdhouse.

## WISE QUACKERS *Spend too much time birdwatching and you'll start wondering what they'd have to say...*



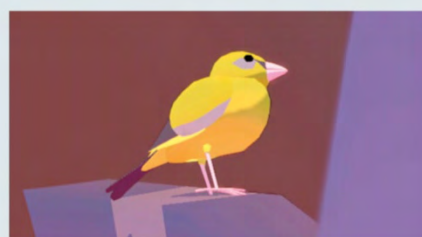
### COLLARED DOVE

A bit of a space cadet. Thinks Gordon Freeman is the bloke who narrated *The Shawshank Redemption*.



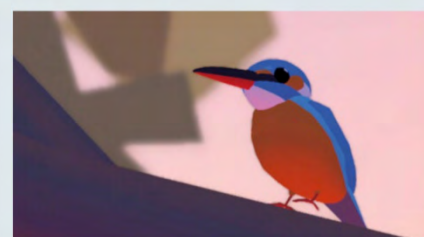
### EURASIAN HOOPOE

Went to a Black Sabbath concert in 1972 and has based their entire personality on that day.



### EUROPEAN GREENFINCH

She's a little sensitive, loves iced coffee, and runs a small Etsy business selling various kitschy earrings.



### COMMON KINGFISHER

Will ask if you have any games on your phone. Loves a bit of *Fortnite*. And fishing (for kings) probably.

"As we started to look at Ecologi, we realised we could do more than just offset," says Sayans. After spending more than two years developing *Alba*, it seemed only natural to turn the game's conservation message into something physically tangible.

"I think it would be very difficult, maybe even impossible, to try and make a game about nature today and not think about 'What's the impact that humans have on nature?'" Sayans says. "We just feel like you'd have to be completely out of touch to not be pondering these themes and not to try to have a positive impact on these themes."

The studio decided that for every copy of the game sold or downloaded (*Alba* is also available on Apple Arcade, a mobile subscription service) they would plant a tree. "We tried to make it really simple," says Sayans. "One copy of the game, one tree."

*Alba* has become the mascot for the tree-planting project and Ustwo's goal for a more environmentally-kind world. Her face is the logo on Ustwo's Ecologi page, which also happens to be named *Alba's Forest*. Her in-game conservation group, AIWRL, is used to promote initiatives that Ustwo games work with. Bringing *Alba's* world to life has also put her creators more in touch with our own. "Even down to things like people being able to recognise species of birds that they would have never had any chance of recognising before," Mistry says. "I'd say specifically the animators and artists now are like 'Yep,

that is definitely a wood pigeon. I can tell by the specific colours', and it's like 'Wow, that's good!'"

Sayans feels like the combination of a game like *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has given people a chance to think again about their relationship with nature. "Suddenly things that maybe you weren't paying attention to, whether it's making bread or the birds in my garden, or the flowers on a walk. You're paying more attention to them because your world has become so much smaller... and I think that in my case, *Alba* definitely inspired me to pay attention to those things."

Despite this, both Mistry and Sayans say that the objective isn't explicitly to educate. *Alba* was designed as an accessible experience that crosses over with our world in a meaningful way.

"We were very careful not to describe it as

educational... because that kind of puts you in a little corner where we didn't want to be," Sayans says. "But the truth is with our games, we try to do more than entertain."

The ultimate goal for Ustwo games is to plant one million trees, a milestone they're already halfway to hitting. But beyond that? Well, Sayans says they'll just keep going. "I can't imagine us stopping once we reach one million trees, right? That would feel unnecessary. Our commitment is to use our power, our position of influence as a force for good. And so I think we'll continue to use that as an inspiration on the games that we make in the future." ■

**THE STUDIO DECIDED THAT FOR EVERY COPY OF THE GAME SOLD, THEY WOULD PLANT A TREE**



# Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

## AFTER EARTH

**HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER**'s inspirations are rooted in terra firma

**S**ometimes a name simply drifts through space, awaiting the perfect project to dock with. *Blade Runner* was originally the title of a little known 1974 sci-fi novel about a black market medical equipment supplier – until Ridley Scott bought the rights, keeping the name and jettisoning everything else.

Similarly, the name 'Shipbreaker' pre-exists the game it now so perfectly describes. *Hardware: Shipbreakers* was originally the working title of *Deserts of Kharak*, the *Homeworld* RTS that became Blackbird Interactive's first release. It was years later that Blackbird would develop a game about shearing huge chunks of metal from the carcasses of starships – but even then, somehow, the team missed the title that was staring them in the face.

"We ran a bunch of internal focus groups trying to figure out what the name of the game was," art director Chris Williams remembers. "We invested a lot of time into it. And there was a moment where a bunch of people came up with 'Shipbreaker'. We made a game that coincidentally hit that."

This bizarre origin story is perhaps explained by the fact that Blackbird, as a studio, has long been fascinated by the real-world profession of shipbreaking. On the beach of Alang, India, where tankers and ocean liners go to die, workers carve apart ships weighing up to 657,019 tonnes.

"On the one hand, it's incredibly awe-inspiring," says game director Elliot Hudson. "These ships get swarmed by hundreds of people with blowtorches who just slowly peel them apart like ants, and then you have these massive pieces of metal crash onto the beach. It's very cool and intriguing to see."

On the other hand, Alang's shipyards have become notorious for the conditions under which their breakers work. Breakers risk death from falling and gas explosions, and some have been crushed under the enormous steel plates that drop from the sky. At least 137 were killed between 2009 and 2019, according to industry monitoring organisation Shipbreaking Platform, while many more succumb to diseases and cancers after exposure to toxic fumes and materials. "It's very cool to see in action, but it's not a positive experience for the people who are working on it," says Hudson. "It has this subtext of class and danger. We wanted to explore that duality."

### TIGHT COLLAR

Players in *Shipbreaker* follow the job description of their real-life inspiration almost to the letter, despite the far-flung setting: they strip vessels for anything of value, down to the antennae and passenger seats, while contending with the ever-present possibility that a blast may rip through the hull if they burn through the wrong panel with their blowtorch. Their exploitation, however, has a distinctly Western vibe to it. Paying off the hidden costs for equipment feels a lot like buying a cheap flight – while the warm language your employers use to cover up their callous policies recalls today's gig economy.

"Extrapolating where we're at right now to 300 years from now, those systems of exploitation are probably just going to get more fine-tuned and prevalent," says Hudson.

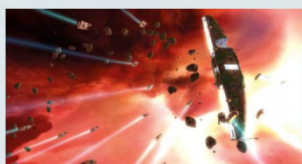
Bad as things are for *Hardspace's* shipbreakers, the game makes it clear that others have it worse. Back home on Earth, nothing awaits but unpaid bills, food shortages, and desperation. Out in the yard, away from the clamour of a species in its death throes, it's at least quiet – peaceful despite the danger. Blackbird drew on the blue collar fantasy of the Roaring '20s, captured by the iconic photograph of construction workers lunching on a girder suspended high above Manhattan.

Then there's the #bluecollarlife movement, which is big on Instagram. Memes about ramming all of your tools under the seat of your truck rub up against posts from trade apps, advertising to the tens of thousands tuning in to watch rodbusters at work. In the 2020s, as in the 1920s and perhaps even the 2320s, blue-collar workers take personal pride in their labour – and companies seek to profit from that pride. "We were very careful not to fetishise the blue collar lifestyle, but to try to honour it," says Hudson. "To explore how that class of people is often exploited by the white collar, the people that manage them." ■

Jeremy Peel

### SHIP BREAKDOWN

*The blueprints for construction of Hardspace's vessels*



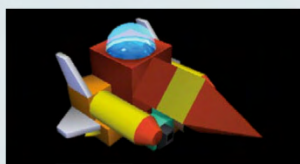
#### HOMEWORLD

Blackbird was founded by Relic veterans, and there's a colour and majesty to its ships that recalls the classic RTS series.



#### FALLOUT

Since ships would need to be pulled apart, Blackbird built a modular art pipeline partly inspired by Bethesda's open worlds.



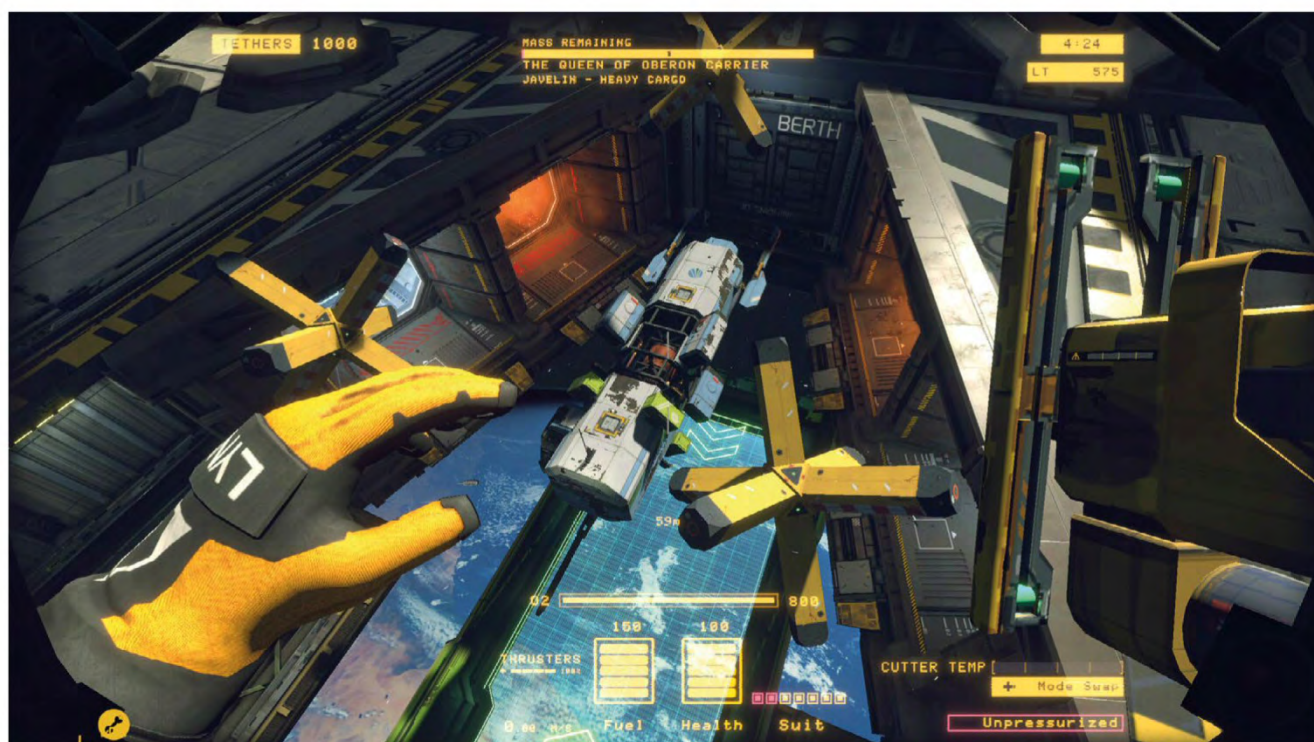
#### KINGDOM HEARTS

The Gummi Ship, which resembles a chunky child's toy, warned the team against the dangers of an overly cubic aesthetic.



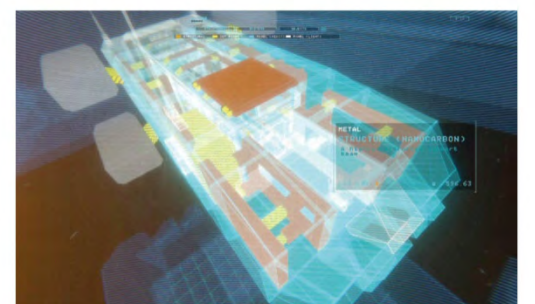


“THOSE SYSTEMS OF EXPLOITATION  
ARE PROBABLY JUST GOING TO GET  
MORE FINE-TUNED AND PREVALENT”



**LEFT:** An early prototype had you grappling and severing objects as they fell to Earth.

**BELOW:** Every last piece of *Hardspace's* ships can be pulled off and sold.





# DNA Tracing

PC GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED



THE STUDIO'S FIRST  
INTERNATIONAL  
SUCCESS WASN'T GTA,  
BUT LEMMINGS



# NORTHERN STAR

Rockstar made millions selling Scotland's natural export: dark comedy

**T**he Houser brothers were born heirs to the world of gangster cinema. Their mother, Geraldine Moffat, was the glamorous actress who rescued Michael Caine in a convertible in *Get Carter*. “You didn’t know you had a fairy godmother, did you?” she yelled over the wind and engine noise, before speeding Caine off to a multi-story car park to be assigned his next mission: the killing of a crime boss.

Sam Houser, the eldest brother, grew up on a diet of films like *The Getaway* and *The French Connection*, ’70s car chase movies that were cool, brutal, and lacking the clear moral centre of the Hollywood thrillers that had come before. When he was five or six, Sam’s wealthy solicitor father took him to a London jazz club to meet Dizzy Gillespie. “What are you going to do when you grow up, son?” the legendary trumpeter asked. “Are you going to be a bank robber?” Sam would do better than that, enabling millions of bank robberies the world over.

*Grand Theft Auto* didn’t start in London, though. It was born further north, in the Dundee offices of DMA Design. Though titles like *Menace* and *Blood Money* might have suggested vicious Steve McQueen flicks, they were in fact sidescrolling space shooters, part of the ’80s post-arcade culture that made the fortunes of early game development moguls like DMA founder Dave Jones. However, the studio’s first international success wasn’t *GTA* but *Lemmings*, the darkly comic yet family friendly puzzle-platformer. *Lemmings* was the *Assassin’s Creed* of its day, spawning sequels and spin-offs through the ’90s (*Oh No! More Lemmings*, *All New World of Lemmings*, *Lemmings Paintball*, *Holiday Lemmings* 1994). It funded multiple teams, a motion-capture studio, and even a team of in-house musicians – sufficient sprawl that *GTA* could be developed by a team that, for the most part, had never shipped a game before.

## COPS AND ROBBERS

Jones, having built his terrarium for digital lemmings to mill about in, wanted to upgrade to a virtual living city – a dynamic crosshatch of streets where pedestrians strolled and cars honked. As with many such simulation concepts, the problem was coming up with a purpose for the player within it: the *GTA* team initially strove for the moral centre missing from *The French Connection*, casting players as a cop who stopped at traffic lights and was punished for running down civilians. But according to David Kushner’s *GTA* biography *Jacked*, some internally dismissed the game as ‘Sims Driving Instructor’, a simulation dedicated to recreating a boring reality. The project only found its direction when the team implemented a carjacking animation, for which the player

was awarded 100 points. Suddenly, *GTA* became transgressive. The role reversal made immediate sense to Sam Houser, by then a producer at DMA’s publisher – as a child, he’d played the quintessential PC simulation *Elite* as a “space mugger”.

*GTA* was a hit, and the first crack in a philosophical schism. Jones, a celebrated businessman in Scotland, grew uncomfortable when the nascent Rockstar recruited the

**BELOW:** Liberty City has long been defined by its sharp verticality.

**BOTTOM:** This cul-de-sac appeared in *GTA V* too. Grove Street for life!



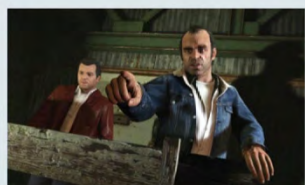
## IN-HOUSE

Three key *GTA* figures whose surnames aren’t Houser



### BRIAN BAGLOW

Set *GTA*’s darkly funny tone as the original game’s writer, before enacting Rockstar’s controversial marketing strategy as ‘head of propaganda and indoctrination’.



### LESLIE BENZIES

Rockstar North’s studio head left after a sabbatical in 2014 – but later claimed he had been locked out of the office against his will, and sued Rockstar over royalty payments.



### DAVE JONES

Scottish games industry luminary and founder of DMA Design. After selling the studio, Jones led development on *Crackdown*, one of *GTA*’s few serious rivals.

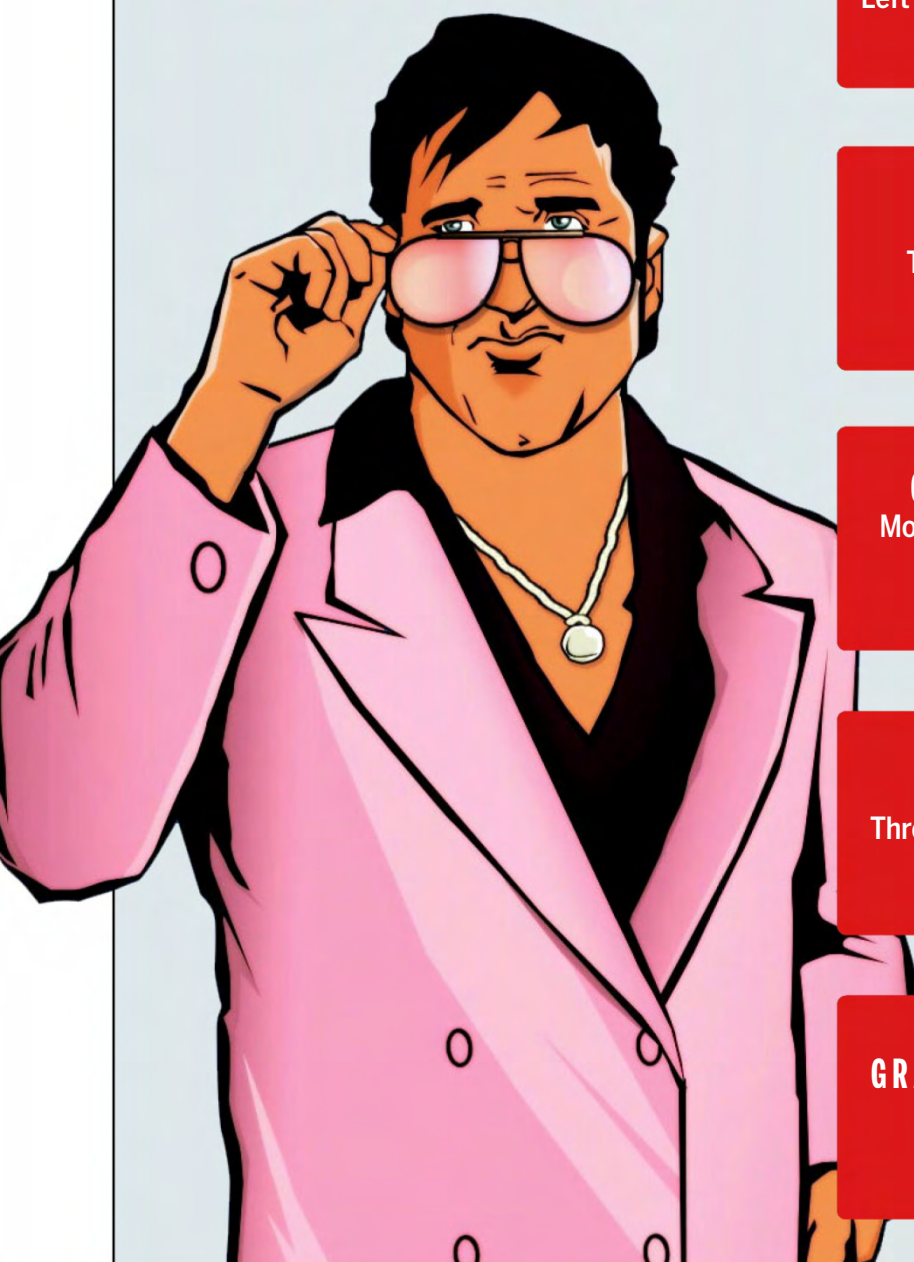
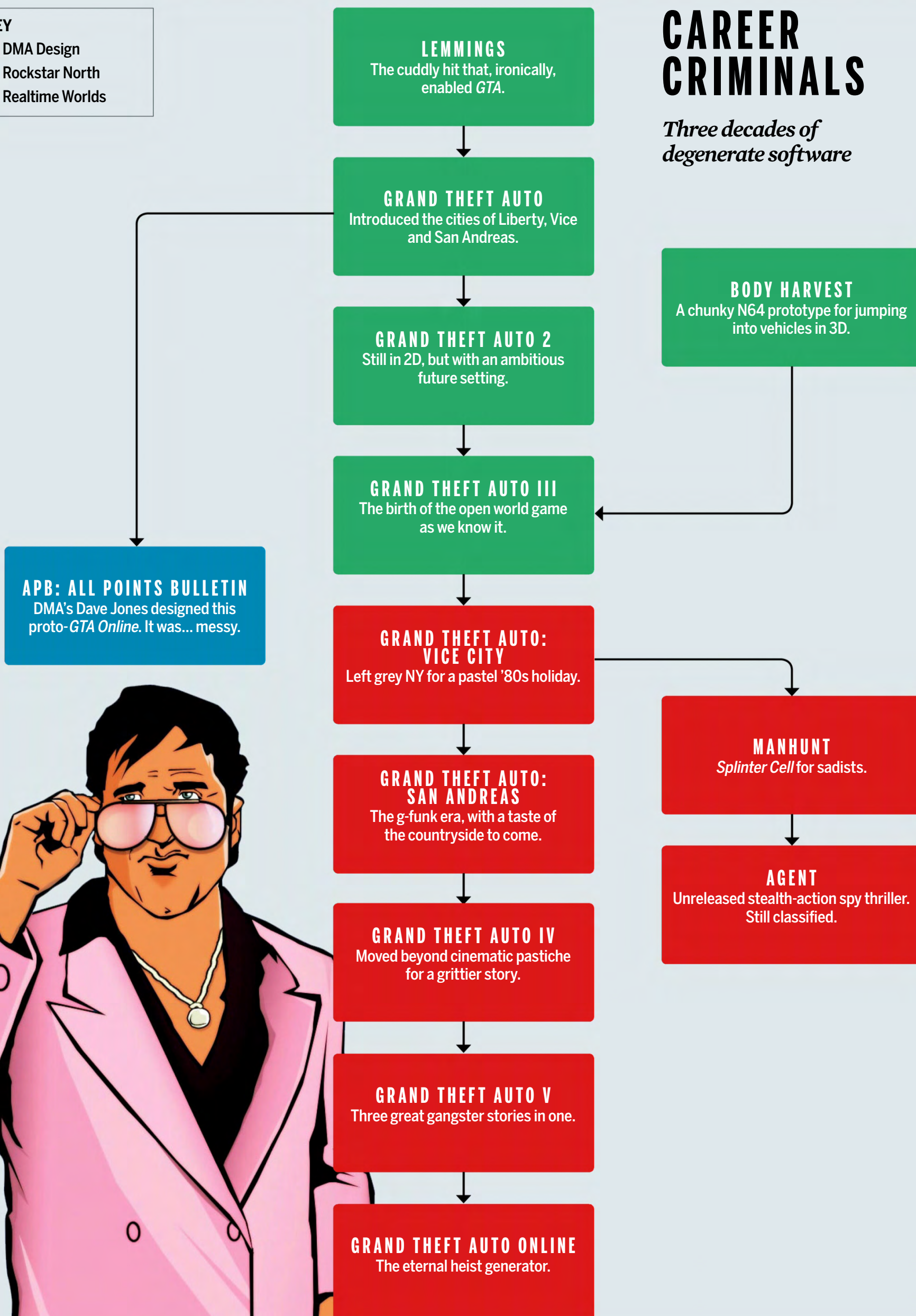


## CAREER CRIMINALS

*Three decades of degenerate software*

### KEY

- DMA Design
- Rockstar North
- Realtime Worlds





» notorious publicist Max Clifford – later found guilty of eight counts of indecent assault against four girls and women aged between 15 and 19 – to promote the game. Clifford whispered in the ears of UK politicians, and *GTA* was condemned in the House of Lords before it was even released. He'd opened Pandora's Box, dooming Rockstar North to a lifetime of public notoriety. With that reputation came a certain cachet – a series that might be made illegal was instantly cool – but it was no surprise when Jones cashed out of the company, and the Housers moved the core *GTA* team to Edinburgh.

## NY STATE OF MIND

From then on, Rockstar North's leadership came undisputedly from the New York loft office where the Houser brothers had set up their publishing label. With Sam's younger brother Dan established as a co-writer on *GTA*, this transatlantic setup would define the tone of the series. The Housers had long loved the excess of America, and now they had a front row seat. They couldn't relate to *GTA*'s cash-strapped criminals – at St Paul's public school in London, Sam was a classmate of future UK chancellor George Osborne. But the brothers' status as expats made them the perfect satirists, close enough to observe but with a distant perspective that allowed them to identify the country's absurdities with ease.

That view was reflected by the team in Edinburgh. "It's like living on the moon," Dan Houser once said of Los Angeles in an interview for *The Guardian*. "Some of the guys from Scotland adore it, some of them can't stand it." That tension has been evident in every one of the 3D worlds Rockstar North has made for *GTA*: superficially beautiful, tremendous fun, and morally bankrupt. The studio has celebrated the country's pop culture through its radio stations, while skewering its media and corporations – who in *GTA* tend to say the quiet part loud ("Weazel News: confirming your prejudices").

## "SOME OF THE GUYS FROM SCOTLAND ADORE IT, SOME OF THEM CAN'T STAND IT"

### PUBLIC ENEMY

Rockstar North has mostly been able to have it both ways, holding up a mirror to US society, while letting players live out a warped fantasy within it. But its most extreme game, *Manhunt*, almost caused a mutiny within Rockstar, as it was deemed indefensible for its plastic bag asphyxiations and genital mutilations, all carried out by the player. The high scores awarded for these killings might have been a logical extension of *GTA*'s points-for-carjackings, and its

white supremacist victims further proof of the studio's fascination with the ugliest sides of America. But it proved to be too unflinching a reflection, and too obvious a form of bait for the decency brigade Clifford had first hooked.

The same was true for Trevor, the psychopath protagonist of *GTA V*. Murderous, unpredictable and unhygienic, he was the behaviour of *GTA* players made flesh – and not all players liked what they saw. But there too in *GTA V* was DMA's heritage, in the rounds of golf and the cable car that took you up to Mount Chiliad: a simulation of life in all its mundanity. Perhaps there's a little of Dave Jones left in Rockstar North after all. ■

**Jeremy Peel**



**LEFT:** Ray Liotta starred in *Vice City*, but Rockstar has embraced lesser-known actors since.





PREVIEW







## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
Autumn 2021

**DEVELOPER**  
Slocap

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
sifugame.com

## SIFU

A singleplayer kung-fu brawler from kung-fu enthusiasts

**T**here's a hallway fight in the *Sifu* trailer that two PC Gamer staffers separately reacted to by saying, "Ah, Oldboy." It's a kung-fu brawler with obvious inspirations: *The Raid*, *John Wick*, the prop combat of Jackie Chan, the power of Bruce Lee. *Sifu* is meant to be a martial arts movie you can play.

You've got to be a little skeptical of a game that sets out to emulate movie legends like that, but what's exciting about *Sifu* is that the developers behind it might actually have the chops (and punches, kicks, etc) to pull it off. Its creator is Paris-based studio Slocap, whose first game was the fantastic online fighter *Absolver*, one of the best martial arts games out there.

I could go on and on about *Absolver* and how it deserved much more love than it got, but I'll just point out the bits relevant for comparison with *Sifu*. The focus of *Absolver* is PvP, but there are NPCs to fight and there's light storytelling to guide new players. Its fighting is complex, with both manual stance changing and moves that start and finish in different stances, precision timing (especially to smoothly chain together combos), stamina management, weapons, and on top of it all, a moveset editor so you can mix and match attacks of different styles. Just writing about it now makes me want to redownload it – it's £25 on Steam, and any claim at being a *Souls*-like aficionado is questionable if you haven't played it.

While aspects of *Sifu*'s fighting should look very familiar to *Absolver* players, it's quite a different game. *Sifu* is entirely singleplayer, for one thing, and there's no moveset editor. It isn't so much a spiritual sequel to *Absolver* as it is another martial arts game from a studio that loves to make martial arts games.

FIRST  
LOOK

The Slocap team will do more online projects in the future, *Sifu* executive producer Pierre Tarno told me over a Zoom chat a day after the game's announcement, but for this one, they wanted to "put all the development efforts in the gameplay" without having to worry about the technical complexities of online game development. The result is a "linear adventure" which gives Slocap new possibilities for structure and storytelling. And because *Sifu* doesn't need the considerations about symmetry called for by a player-vs-player game – you're always fighting AI, who can behave however the developer chooses – the focus of the combat can be different, too.

"The fantasy we want is that sort of Jackie Chan movie fantasy where it's one versus many," says Tarno, "whereas *Absolver* was very much 1v1." That's reflected in the trailer's hallway fight, where the hero takes on seven combatants, one of whom he knocks out by hurling a pipe at their head. There's also a nightclub level that's reminiscent of the John Wick scene – except without Keanu Reeves shooting guys in the neck.

## THE WORLD IS MY GYM

We haven't seen any guns, but there will be other weapons. Also, in the style of Jackie Chan, who due to a fundamental property of the universe is always near a ladder, you'll be able to use your environment to your advantage – climbing on ledges, throwing objects, pushing furniture, picking up makeshift weapons and so on.

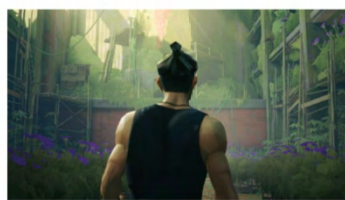
Driving these fights is a story about a kung-fu student seeking revenge against the five assassins who murdered his family, which tells us something of *Sifu*'s structure: we'll be beating up goons on the way into each assassin's hideout, where, naturally, we'll face off against an assassin boss. We've seen an apparent glimpse of one such fight, which appeared to be a 1v1 bout, so maybe it's not all crowd brawls. *Absolver* included some truly challenging NPC bosses, though, so it's not as if



A MARTIAL ARTS GAME FROM A STUDIO THAT LOVES TO MAKE MARTIAL ARTS GAMES



## Sifu



» Sloclap can't make mano-a-mano fights work, too. Bosses can always call in reinforcements, as well. (On that note, Tarno stressed that we only beat up the low-level baddies because they're in the way. The assassins are our real targets.)

One curious thing we see in the *Sifu* announcement trailer is that it's possible to come back to life if you die along the way, but there's a catch: the character grows older each time. That led me to speculate that there might be some kind of roguelike structure to *Sifu*, but Tarno says that's not quite right. He wasn't ready to get into details, but pointed out that in the trailer, the character stands up from where they were knocked down. He also said that the character does not become weaker as he ages – he's becoming an old kung-fu master, of course.

Tarno was able to be a little more specific when I asked whether something like *Absolver*'s moveset customisation system would show up in *Sifu*. The short answer is no. The character's moves will evolve throughout the game, but there won't be a combo editor or different martial arts styles to choose from. There will only be one combat style, and that fact is an essential part of *Sifu*.

"This game is about Pak Mei kung fu, and so the moveset of the character reflects that," says Tarno. "And so it's really more about learning [Pak Mei], mastering it, understanding the different properties and uses in combat, adapting to situations within that moveset. There will be some evolutions of the movesets, without going into too many details, but there will not be full creation or customisation that you have in *Absolver*."

The word 'sifu' refers to a master, and there's a real kung-fu master involved with the game. *Sifu*'s creative director, Jordan Layani, studies under Sifu Benjamin Culos, a master of Lao Siu Leung Pak Mei, which he learned in Foshan, China. Culos now runs a school in Paris called Lao Wei San Pak Mei, after his own master. As you can tell, lineage is an essential part of the art's teachings and traditions, and that comes through in the game: the trailer begins with the protagonist meditating in front of a picture of his own sifu. That's the kind of scene where a real master's

expertise was useful. "The incense should be there," says Tarno, expressing how Culos would give feedback, "and the text on the side should say this, and you wouldn't have training mats on the right."

## SIFU'D

Culos is also advising on combat. So far, we've seen lots of fast punches followed by powerful kicks, but that's just a glimpse. Whatever the moveset looks like, I suspect that mashing buttons will only take a person so far. Even if the customisation and stance system from *Absolver* haven't transferred over, I'd expect to see something like its rhythmic, thoughtful combat in *Sifu*. In other words, I expect it to be difficult.

Tarno counts both the movements and values of Pak Mei as the inspirations for *Sifu*. Regarding values and the story, he didn't want to reveal too much, but hinted that it's not necessarily a straightforward revenge tale. He pointed out that 'kung-fu' refers not to combat but "mastery through practice" as in the gongfu tea ceremony. "Is one life enough to have kung-fu?" he asked. The ageing system is part of the answer to that question.

At the same time, *Sifu* is about beating dudes up, and it's easy to see how "mastery through practice" can refer to our progression through the game. Tarno confirmed that the theme of mastery applies to the difficulty of the combat.

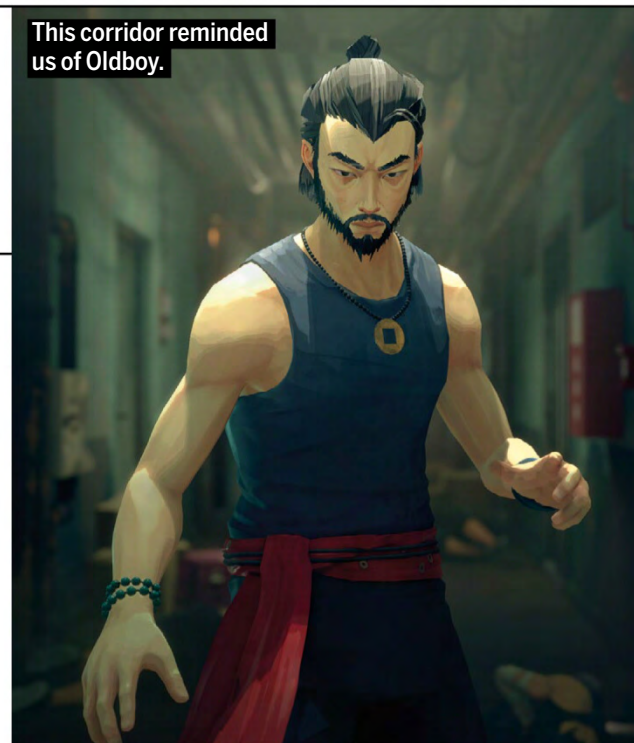
"We see this as a challenging game," says Tarno. "Also, that creates interesting things relating to the ageing. But it would do a disservice to the game if we sort of gave away that fantasy right away, you know in Batman or Spider-Man, where from the get-go you're superpowered. No, there has to be a learning curve, and for the experience that we want to bring to players to be coherent with the vision, you're going to have to need to earn it, and progress in your mastery of the systems."

What difficulty options may or may not be available is uncertain – Tarno doesn't have any definitive answers on that topic right now – but *Sifu* is definitely not going to be a cakewalk. *Dark Souls* was among the inspirations for *Absolver*, and though perhaps in a subtler way, it shows up again here in the sense that "mistakes have a cost". Tarno wondered if the trailer should've shown the player taking more of a beating to communicate that.

*Sifu* doesn't have a release date yet, but it's scheduled to come out this autumn on the Epic Games Store.

Tyler Wilde

This corridor reminded us of Oldboy.

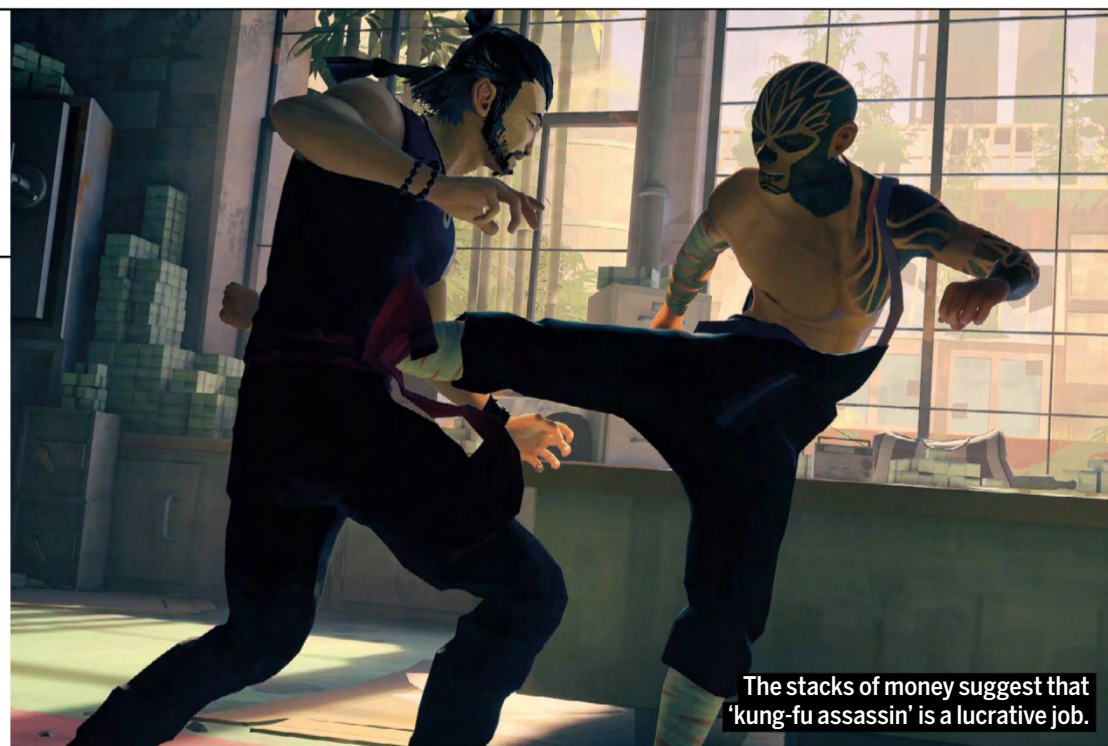


Bottles, tables and pipes are just a few of the improvised weapons we've seen.

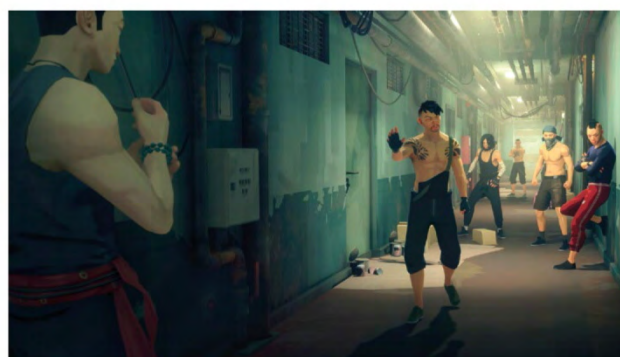
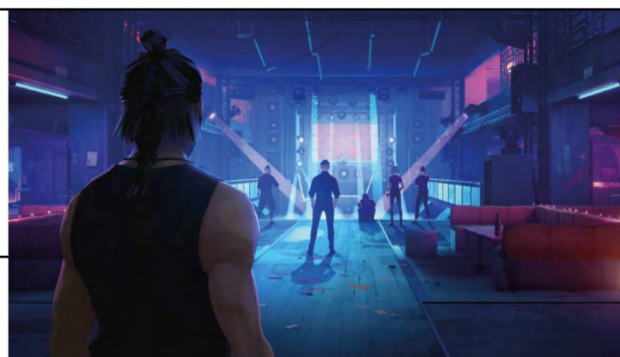


**"THIS GAME IS ABOUT PAK MEI KUNG FU, AND SO THE MOVESET REFLECTS THAT"**





The stacks of money suggest that 'kung-fu assassin' is a lucrative job.





## PREVIEW

### *Aliens: Fireteam*



If all else fails, whip out the flamethrower.

#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
Summer

**DEVELOPER**  
Cold Iron Studios

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[aliensfireteam.com](http://aliensfireteam.com)

## ALIENS: FIRETEAM

*It's Left 4 Dead but with xenomorphs, basically*

**I**n this new co-op survival shooter you create your own Colonial Marine, team up with three friends online (or bots), and battle xenomorphs, rogue androids, and other Alien-themed enemies across four campaigns. Set 23 years after the movies, you've been sent to protect colonies from xenomorph attacks, which have become a regular occurrence.

Developer Cold Iron makes it clear that the inspiration here is *Aliens*, not *Alien*. And I can't help but think, "Haven't we done this already?". So many shooters have riffed on James Cameron's 1986 sequel that it's become a cliché. And after *Alien: Isolation*, *Fireteam* feels like a step backwards.

From how the developer describes *Fireteam's* campaigns, *Left 4 Dead* seems to be a big inspiration. There are 11 species of xenomorph, each with different abilities and behaviours. Zinkievich talks about "an algorithm running behind the scenes" changing things on the fly as you play, which recalls *Left 4 Dead's* AI director. And the story-driven campaigns are being designed to be dynamic and unpredictable, encouraging repeat plays.

Zinkievich says a lot of work has gone into the xenomorphs' AI and how they move, describing the game as a "3D shooter experience". This means the xenos will be, in theory, extremely mobile, able to crawl along ceilings, scale walls, and skulk through air vents.

In a hands-off demo I see a four-player squad fend off waves of xenomorphs, and

they really do seem relentless, crawling from every corner of the screen. Players are frequently downed by the creatures, forcing allies to rush in and revive them, which again is very *Left 4 Dead*. Zinkievich also says that the xenos' acid blood will be a major concern on higher difficulties.

In action, *Fireteam* looks fine. The third-person combat reminds me a lot of *The Division*, with deployable gadgets such as portable turrets to help you in battle. But overall, I was a little underwhelmed. It looks like a perfectly serviceable shooter, but lacks a certain spark. It didn't excite me.

#### GAME OVER, MAN

As I watch one squad member insta-kill a dozen drones in a row with a shotgun, bad memories of Gearbox's dismal *Colonial Marines* come drifting back. This could be a better game, but I guess I've just been spoiled by *Isolation*. In that game, Creative Assembly made the xenomorph, finally, feel like more than just cannon fodder.

Between missions you'll hang out on a warship, the Endeavour, where you can talk to characters and find lore items.

While there will be some connections to the movies other Alien media, Zinkievich stresses that this is an original story. He says it's "not a tourism game", which honestly strikes me as a missed opportunity. I'd love to blast my way through the Nostromo, Hadley's Hope, and Fury 161.

*Fireteam* will have an RPG-style progression system. Your marine will level up, getting access to better gear, cosmetic items and weapons that can be customised. You'll also be able to apply modifiers called Challenge Cards to each run through a campaign to mix things up, and switch between classes mid-game. Cold Iron didn't go into much depth about the classes, but their names – gunner, demolisher, technician, doc, and recon – are pretty self explanatory.

*Fireteam* has potential, but the concept hasn't blown me away. There's so much that could be done with the Alien IP, and a co-op shooter based on *Aliens* feels like the lowest hanging fruit. *Aliens* is well-trodden ground for videogames, so it remains to be seen whether Cold Iron can make its own mark on the franchise.

*Andy Kelly*

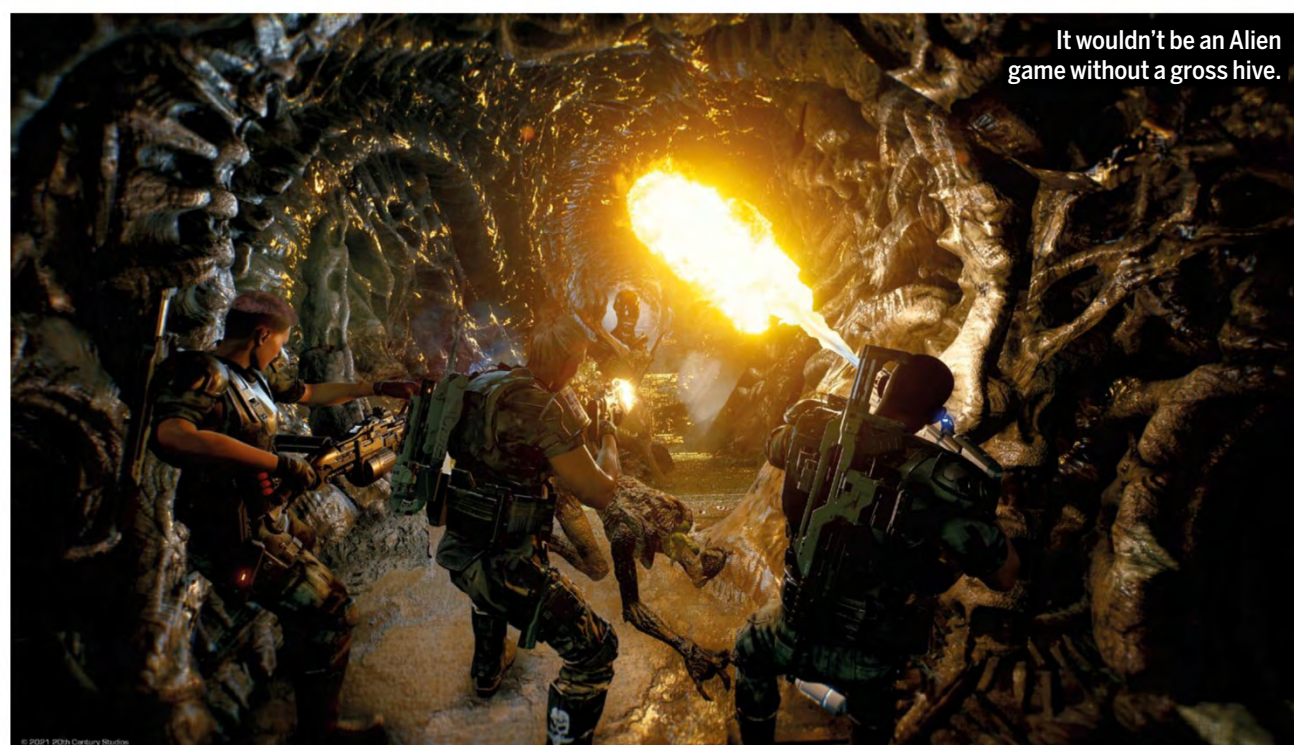
FIRST  
LOOK

**THE STORY-DRIVEN CAMPAIGNS ARE BEING DESIGNED TO BE DYNAMIC AND UNPREDICTABLE**

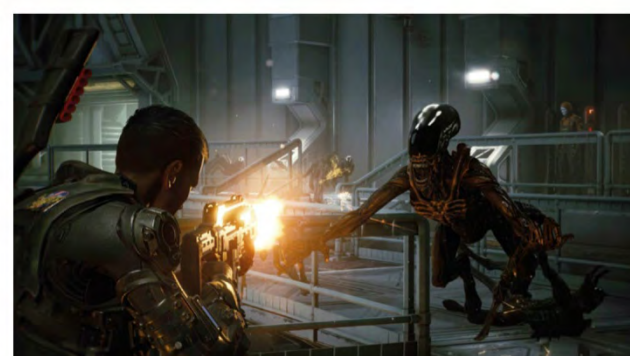


Never seen these glowing head xenos before.





It wouldn't be an Alien game without a gross hive.



More hot (literally) flamethrower action.



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**PC GAMER**





# TOTAL WAR: ROME REMASTERED

FIRST  
LOOK

The classic *Total War* is back for another fight

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
April 29

DEVELOPER  
Feral Interactive, Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER  
Sega

LINK  
totalwar.com

The history nerds at Creative Assembly have decided to explore their own history for the next *Total War*, enlisting Feral Interactive to dig up the original *Rome* and give it a good dusting. The result is *Total War: Rome Remastered*, sporting a 4K upgrade, 16 new factions, and a few other modern bells and whistles.

*Rome*'s probably the oldest *Total War* that's worth remastering. It was the series' first big leap, and it's the most recognisable of the original trio thanks to the 3D units and fleshed out campaign map. Even after nearly 20 years, there are plenty of common threads that run from *Rome* through all its successors.

"What better excuse than the 20th year of *Total War* to revisit a grand master?" says Rob Bartholomew, chief product officer at Creative Assembly. "The original release of *Rome* marks a special time for us as our first major breakout title; it's amazing to get the opportunity to remaster it with our friends at Feral."

## HANDLE WITH CARE

David Stephen, Feral's managing director, describes it being "a bit like recutting the crown jewels", so the remastered edition isn't mucking around too much with the fundamentals. Diplomacy is being overhauled, however, along with the UI,

camera, and controls. In battle, you'll be able to use a tactical map, while the campaign will feature heat maps and icon overlays. You'll be able to rotate the camera in the campaign, and you can expect wider zoom levels throughout. When you get tired of battering the AI, you'll also be able to duke it out in cross-platform multiplayer between Windows, Mac, and Linux.

Sixteen formerly unplayable factions are being tossed into the war, bringing the total to thirty-eight. Spain, Scythia, Thrace, Numedia, Armenia, Pontus, Macedon, and Dacia will be included in the main game. The Berbers, Burgundii, Celts, Lombardi, Ostrogoths, Romano-British, Roxolani, and Slavs will be playable in *Barbarian Invasion*. Along with that expansion, the *Alexander* content is also getting the remaster treatment, though the faction number will stay the same.

Instead of making it look a bit like *Rome II*, the remaster preserves the original *Rome*'s visual identity, while gussying it up with a 4K upgrade and overhauled models and battlefields. It looks like the lighting and reflections have been improved, too, and boy doesn't that shiny armour look nice? Judging by the screenshots, it's a version of *Rome* that matches my rose-tinted memories.

With *Warhammer and Three Kingdoms*, it feels like *Total War* is the best it's ever been, so I'm not sure how long this trip down memory lane will hold my attention before I start to ache for the present. But nostalgia is a powerful force and the opportunity to play what was once my favourite strategy game with a fresh coat of paint is too tempting to pass up.

Fraser Brown



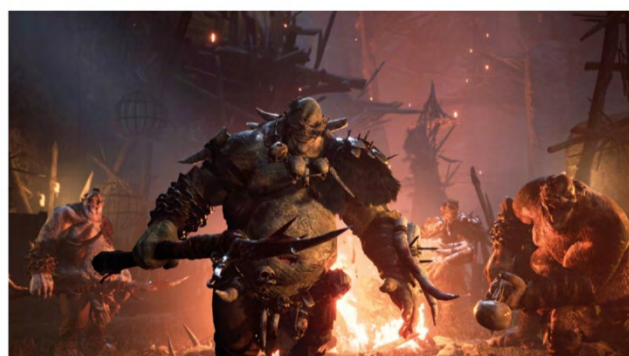


## PREVIEW

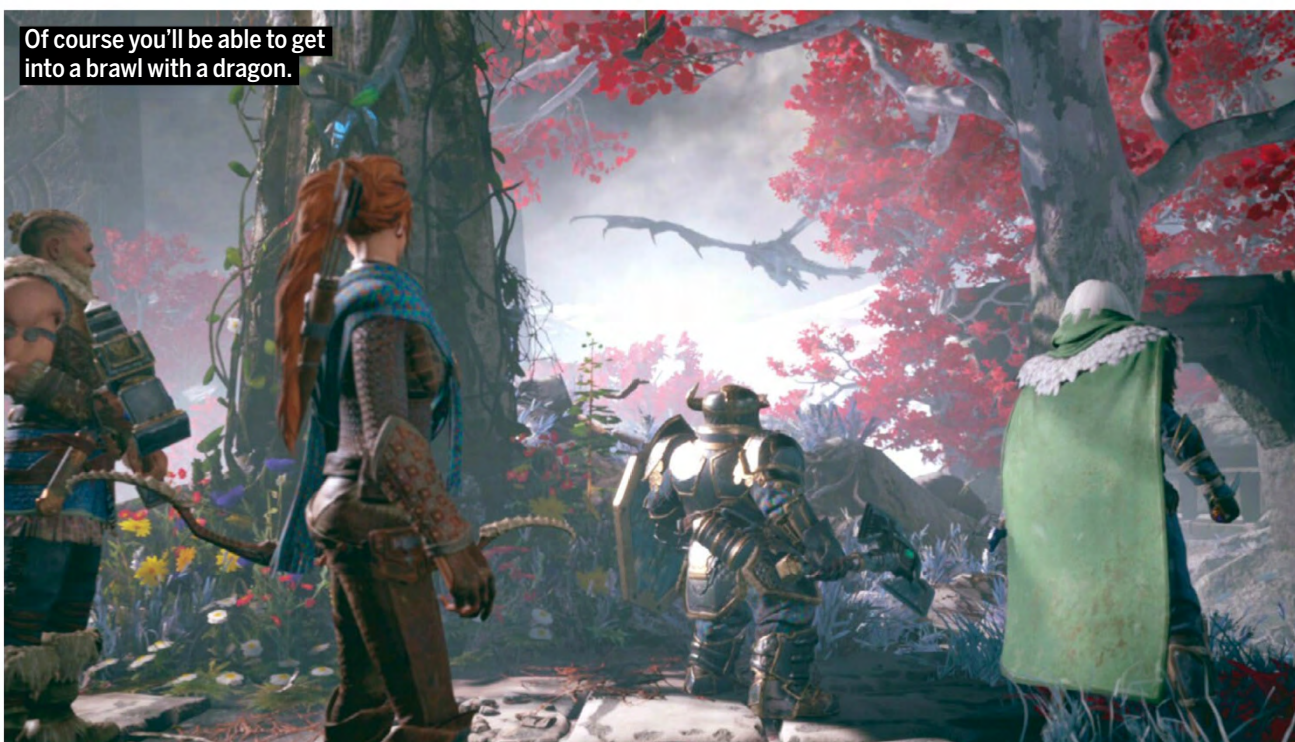
### *Dark Alliance*



Missions also contain tougher monsters lurking off the beaten track, like this frost troll.

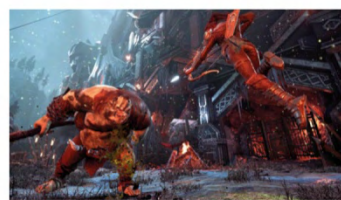


*Dark Alliance* has become a lot flashier since it ditched the top-down view.



Of course you'll be able to get into a brawl with a dragon.





## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
June 22

**DEVELOPER**  
Tuque Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Wizards of the Coast

**LINK**  
[darkalliance.wizards.com](http://darkalliance.wizards.com)

# DARK ALLIANCE

It's D&D, but with more death and fewer dice

**T**uque Games' *Dark Alliance* is D&D for the impatient. It's got the setting, characters, and language of D&D, but they're draped over an action game that will see you fighting without ever worrying about dice rolls. Kill goblins, grab loot, admire your new cloak – it's about the simple pleasures.

Though technically the third game in the *Dark Alliance* series, the slate has been wiped clean for its PC debut. Previously a top-down action-RPG exclusively for consoles, *Dark Alliance* is now a third-person action game where clicks have been replaced by combos.

As celebrity drow Drizzt Do'Urden, I rush around Icewind Dale, dodging, leaping and backstabbing with the goblin body count rapidly rising. While I button-bash my way through the mostly linear mission map, there's still an RPG working away under the hood, but things like ability scores and feats have been reshaped around a game that's mostly pure action.

I can choose to level up my charisma attribute, for instance, but in *Dark Alliance* it has nothing to do with persuasion. Instead, it determines how quickly my ultimate ability recharges. I'll have to wait until after the mission, though, because levelling up, unlocking feats, and equipping new gear only happens back at camp. When you're on a quest, there's nothing to distract you from the action.

*Dark Alliance* doesn't just pay lip service to D&D, and Tuque has adapted various

D&D staples in interesting ways, like the rest system. You can find campfires that let you take a short rest, healing and recharging you, but they also provide a checkpoint. You can choose to ignore them, however, and you'll be rewarded with better loot for taking the risk.

While *Dark Alliance* can be played solo, it might be a bit tricky, especially since there are no AI companions. It's really designed for co-op parties, with abilities that are meant to synergise and fights that will be a lot easier with teamwork. For the demo, I'm accompanied by a developer playing another member of the quartet, Catti-Brie.

## NO CLASS

Technically, Drizzt is a ranger and Catti-Brie is a fighter, but the R A Salvatore novels that made them D&D stars are less tied to the concept of classes than the tabletop game, and *Dark Alliance* follows suit. Drizzt has more in common with a fighter or rogue, alternating between diving headfirst into the throng of monsters and turning invisible so he can go in for the backstab. He can also

summon his panther from the astral plane to briefly attack his foes. Catti-Brie, meanwhile, serves as ranged support, peppering enemies with arrows, trapping them with magical vines and healing her pals.

Dashing around with twin scimitars, summoning astral panthers and turning invisible makes it easier to overlook that I'm fighting goblins again. My main target, though, is a group of verbeegs, a lesser known type of giant-kin that I don't think I've ever seen before. It turns out that they're avid singers, and their bellowing accompanies me throughout the mission, growing louder and louder as I approach their camp. The pace of the demo doesn't leave a lot of room for *Dark Alliance* to display much personality, so the inclusion of some musical giants is very welcome.

With the verbeegs defeated, it's time to teleport back to camp and admire all my rewards. The greatest of them all, of course, is being able to unlock some new cosmetic appearances for my gear sets, purchased from my deep gnome pal. Even with action taking centre stage, there's always time to look nice.

Fraser Brown

PLAYED IT

ON A QUEST, THERE'S NOTHING TO DISTRACT YOU FROM THE ACTION

Drizzt's best special ability is that he gets all the cool cloaks.



## PREVIEW

### Stonefly

#### NEED TO KNOW

##### RELEASE

Summer

##### PUBLISHER

MWM Interactive

##### DEVELOPER

Flight School Studio

##### LINK

stoneflygame.com

## STONEFLY

FIRST  
LOOK

Discover a wonderfully  
miniature world

**F**light School Studio has left the electrifying pinball hack-n-slash action of *Creature in the Well* behind for a tranquil jaunt through nature in *Stonefly*. This game puts a magnifying glass over a forest's undergrowth, letting us take a peek at an entire bug ecosystem all from the safety of the world's most adorably tiny mech suit. You play as an enterprising young engineer named Annika whose love for inventing has led her on a quest to find a lost family heirloom. Piloting your mech, you'll need to help Annika search the dizzying highs and dangerous lows of the forest's miniature hidden world.

*Rachel Watts*

#### GIRL GENIUS

The main character of *Stonefly* is engineer Annika. Following in the footsteps of her absent father, she's a mech-building genius whose inventions are inspired by nature.

#### HAPPY CAMPER

In your base camp, you can chat with your rag-tag group of explorers, upgrade your mech with Annika's newly found inspirations, and take stock of what resources you've found.



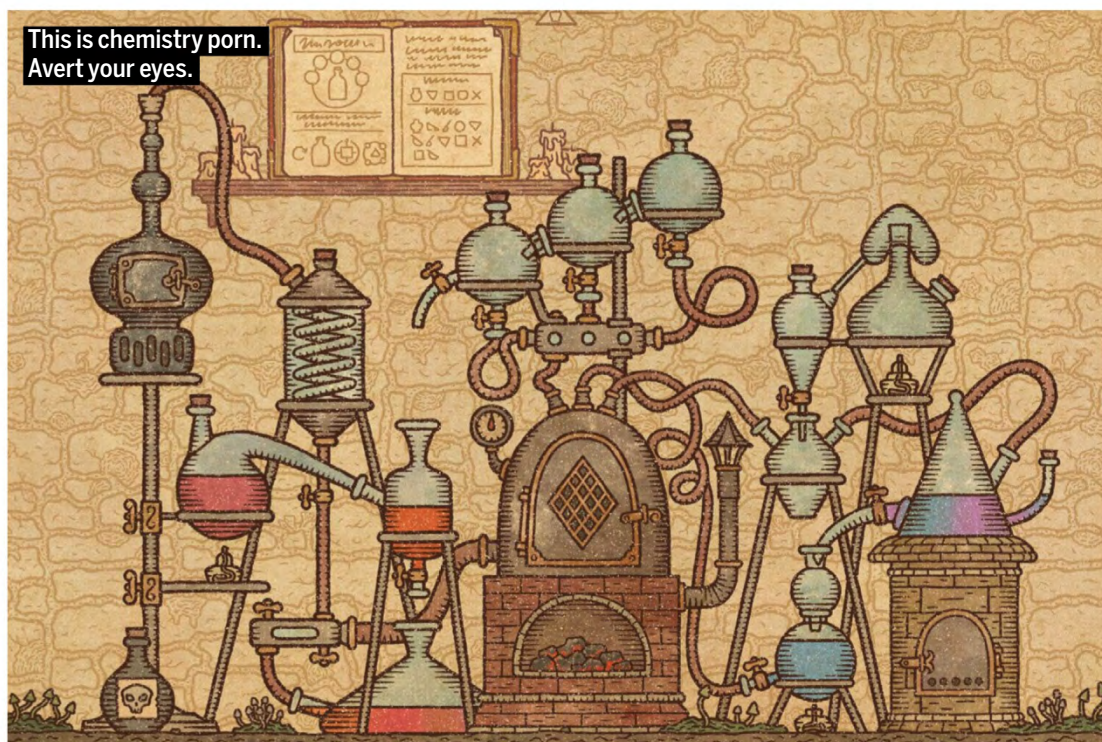
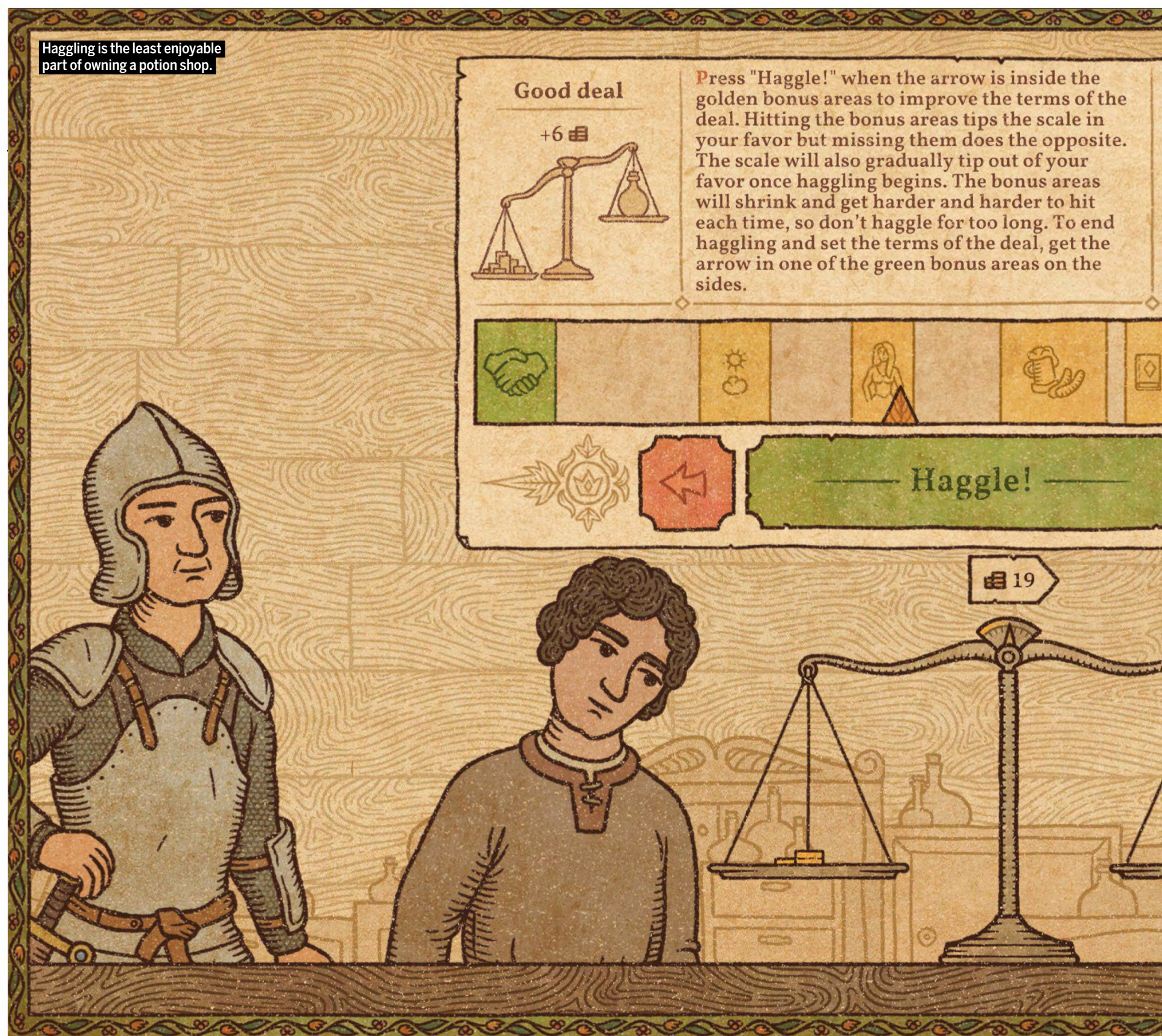
**NUTS AND BOLTS**

Sleek modern aesthetic meets insect-inspired design with *Stonefly's* mechs. They may look heavy, but they're sprightly machines and will help you gather resources in the wild, hopping and gliding with ease.

**BUGS LIFE**

Most of *Stonefly's* bugs are friendly and will only need a light gust to keep away, but the bigger ones will need a more hands-on approach.







## Potion Craft: Alchemist Simulator



### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2021

DEVELOPER  
niceplay games

PUBLISHER  
tinyBuild

LINK  
[potioncraft.com](http://potioncraft.com)

# POTION CRAFT: ALCHEMIST SIMULATOR

Become a small business owner thanks to your trusty cauldron

**W**hen I was still in single digits, I went through a potion-brewing phase. Inspired by Roald Dahl's *George's Marvellous Medicine*, I was convinced that with the right ingredients I too could concoct a magical elixir. Instead of hitting up the medicine cabinet, I took advantage of all the farms and woods nearby to create my brews.

Plants, mushrooms, manure – everything went in the bucket. I never could find any guinea pigs, sadly, and there was no way I was going to slurp down that bubbling, foul-smelling bile first. But now, thanks to *Potion Craft: Alchemist Simulator*, I've got queues of people willing to pay for the privilege.

Creating each new recipe in *Potion Craft* is like going on a mini adventure, with each ingredient pushing you further into the unknown. And you do this without leaving your cauldron's side. It's weird, but it captures the magic of invention and creation in a way more 'realistic' crafting systems often don't.

I found myself charmed before I even opened up my potion shop, after gawking at screenshots of art inspired by medieval manuscripts. In-game, the parchment springs to life as you mash up ingredients with your mortar and pestle, or work the bellows. All the mashing, stirring and pumping is done by hand, making it tactile, but never hard work. There's no QTEs, when you're making potions at least.

PLAYED  
IT

You've got to take your concoction on a journey, which is expressed literally via a map full of magical effects and dangers you'll want to avoid. Each ingredient takes the potion in a specific direction, following its own path. The more you add, the further afield your potion goes, passing through experience nodes and effects, until you decide you're done. Then you can slap a label on it and give it a sexy name.

Every screen is a separate room. Below the potion brewing area is a basement taken up by a tangle of tubes, jars, valves and, at the centre, an imposing furnace. This massive chemistry set is where you'll start tinkering away even more with your potions. There's also a garden, where you can pick up ingredients, a bedroom that lets you move to the next day, and then the money-maker: the shop.

### BAD BUSINESS

I'm a wee bit less enchanted with the retail side of things, but that's mostly down to the haggling system. Every customer comes in with a story and a potion request. If you can find what they need, they'll name their price. Then you can try to bleed a bit more money out of them in a mindless haggling minigame where you keep slamming the haggle button at the right time. I think I'd prefer just losing the cash. Otherwise, it's got a lot of potential.

There's a reputation system that can attract and put off customers, but there's also the hint of something more complex – that maybe there are benefits to a bad reputation. As well as folk popping in to get indigestion cures, you'll be approached with more sinister requests. One bloke needed some poison, no questions asked, and was clearly up to no good, but I sold him the foul stuff anyway, at the cost of my good reputation. Then he came back, looking for more, and made it very clear that I was in this with him now.

*Potion Craft* could probably get by on charm alone, but thankfully it's also shaping up to be a clever, abstract alchemy sim. If gritty, numbers-heavy business management is your obsession, this probably won't scratch your itch – it's not really a conventional business sim – but you might as well download the Steam demo anyway, because it's great.

Fraser Brown



## I FOUND MYSELF CHARMED BEFORE I EVEN OPENED UP MY POTION SHOP



## Hellish Quart



### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£13.50

**DEVELOPER**  
Kubold

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/2N57B2Q](https://bit.ly/2N57B2Q)

# HELLISH QUART

The most authentic 17th century sword-fighting game you'll play

**I**'m so enthusiastic about this sword-fighting game that I'd better start with a disclaimer: *Hellish Quart* is in Early Access, and it's pretty rough. The menus look like placeholders, the planned campaign is absent, and the only way to play online multiplayer is streaming. But it's just so fun regardless.

*Hellish Quart* (weird name, I know) is a 1v1 duelling game: the goal, naturally, is to slice or stab your opponent to death, or at least strike their dominant arm hard enough that they drop their sword (or their hand flies off). There are hidden health bars, but like PS1 classic *Bushido Blade*, it only takes one deep slash or gut stab to end a round, and your opponent's life. A lot of rounds end in draws, since it's possible for both fighters to strike vital arteries at the same time, or even one after the other. It doesn't necessarily matter that one fighter is spurting blood and the slow-mo death cam has already kicked in. As they die, their body is going to finish whatever it was doing, which can include landing a killing blow of their own.

Rounds often end with a scimitar in someone's head within two seconds, but a quick resolution isn't a given. If the AI and I both survive our opening gambits, a fight can go on and on as we trade nicks, shove and block, and dash in and out of range.

The animations occasionally get wonky – physics will do that – but they're mostly great. *Hellish Quart* has just one developer, Jakub 'Kubold' Kisiel, whose CV

includes animating Geralt's moves for *The Witcher 3*. I especially love the way the characters boast after slaying an opponent, strutting around in an uncannily modern way.

### DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Blocking is handled automatically, but if you block too much your opponent may cut through your guard. At close range, where it's impossible to swing a sword properly, regular attacks automatically become knees and elbows that push your opponent back with a brief stun. It's also possible to manually push your opponent's sword hand away, although I rarely manage to pull the move off as the timing is quite tricky. Harder yet is to land a grab on the AI, which results in an automatic round win – a nasty decapitation move, for some characters.

Unfortunately, I don't have anyone to play local multiplayer with, but just fighting the AI has been fun enough to kill five hours. Steam Remote Play Together does make online multiplayer possible (you can also use a service called Parsec), but I didn't have a great result. My opponent, who was just 90 miles northeast of me, found the lag too disruptive to play properly. Your results may vary, it just depends on the particulars of the broadband environment you and your friend are in.

Future plans for *Hellish Quart*, which Kubold expects to be in Early Access for a couple of years, include more fighting styles and characters (with the help of mocapped fencers), more AI types, more arenas, a story campaign, and full Parsec integration for more seamless multiplayer, which is nice, but still not ideal.

As for the story campaign, right now there's just a teaser cutscene, and you don't get the sense that it'll be the game's strong suit. No big deal: I'd be happy just to see some refinements to the fighting system. As I get better at *Hellish Quart*, I'm starting to desire a finer level of control over my stance and the motions that initiate my attacks.

If you're not sure you want to go along for the Early Access ride with this one – and it is a bit sparse right now – there's a free demo you can try. You can find it on *Hellish Quart*'s Steam page.

**Tyler Wilde**

PLAYED IT

IT ONLY TAKES ONE DEEP SLASH OR GUT STAB TO END A ROUND



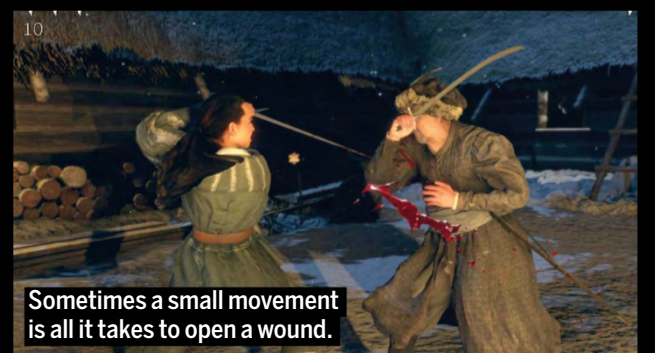
It's satisfying to turn a loss into a draw with a late hit as you go down.



Everybody wins!



The 17th century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not very cheerful.



Sometimes a small movement is all it takes to open a wound.





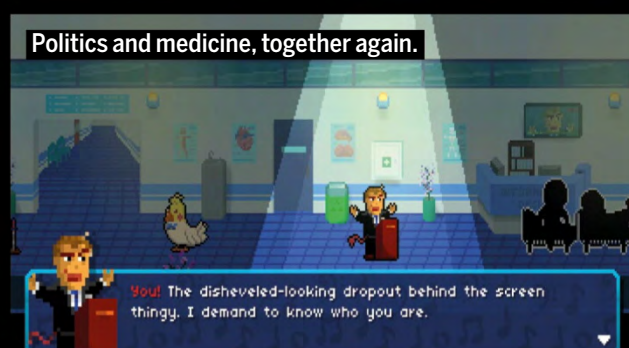
## EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

### *Rhythm Doctor*

Nicole's constant panic and exhaustion makes her awfully relatable.



Politics and medicine, together again.



If the visual glitches don't distract you, the stunning art might.





## NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£12.40

**DEVELOPER**  
7th Beat Games

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house, indienova

**LINK**  
rhythmdr.com

# RHYTHM DOCTOR

Groove is in the heart in this quirky rhythm game

**W**hen I think of rhythm games, I picture inputs chaotically dancing across the screen, each begging for my attention. But *Rhythm Doctor* only demands only one – just hit the spacebar every seventh beat. Seems simple enough, but this game is not for the faint of heart. Well, unless you're one of its patients.

*Rhythm Doctor* dropped me right in the heart of Middlesea Hospital, a struggling institute that's trying out an experimental new type of rhythm-based healthcare. I'm the new intern, a simple disembodied arm and a silent face behind the screen. There's a whole cast of characters demanding my time, including a poorly samurai who's suffering from a wi-fi virus. and the hospital's hapless barista who can't quite kick that nasty smoking habit.

All their treatments come in the form of the single-button gameplay, which utilises some clever audio and visual tricks. The screen will pulsate or shudder during the heavier beat tracks, doing its best to throw me off. Each song plays around with tempo and irregular beats, ramping up the intensity when the beat drops, forcing me to stay on my toes. Some songs even introduce several patients, each with different timings. Occasionally one of the doctors will be there to assist, other times I'm left to manage each one alone.

It's these types of variations that left me wanting to jump straight into the next level, just to see what the game would

throw at me. That, and the incredible music. While rhythm games usually have a few duds, every song in *Rhythm Doctor*'s current catalogue is a certifiable bop. There's a genre to suit everybody's taste – from lo-fi study beats to the incredible vocal tracks peppered across the game.

## HEART-BREAKER

Every level in *Rhythm Doctor* has something to offer, but the bosses are where the game's creativity shines. The visual tricks turn from simple jitters to wild glitches, performing acrobatic flips around my monitor to the beat of the song. It sounds like it should be a nuisance, but it adds so much power and urgency that separates the bosses from the regular levels. Act two's boss battle is so spectacular that it left me in tears, prompting an immediate replay.

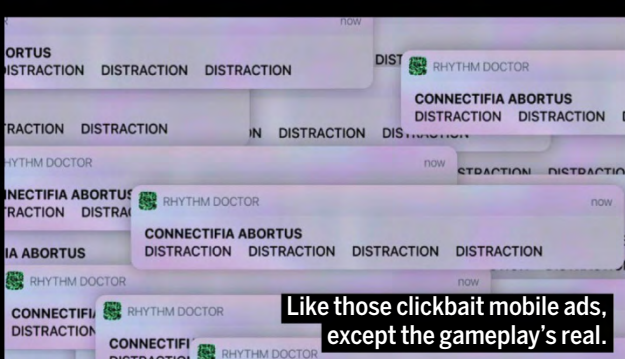
*Rhythm Doctor* plays with your expectations and then ramps that up to the nth degree. Every inch of this game has been designed with a level of creativity that will have you smiling, laughing, or crying. Even the tutorials have been given an insane amount of care – like one scene where a politician angrily interrupts the tutorial prior to his level, shooing the poor tutorial character off the screen before taking his place.

The way the cast interacted with me, and each other, was something I hadn't expected. I'm not usually a fan of storylines in rhythm games, but it feels so integral to the *Rhythm Doctor* experience. Each character plays a part in each other's stories, offering a humorous and often heartbreaking look into the world of medicine. The story isn't finished, but the foundations laid have me eager to return.

7th Beat Games has been working on *Rhythm Doctor* since 2014, and it's come a long way since the last itch.io demo. The level of refinement is beyond what I'd expect from an Early Access game. *Rhythm Doctor* isn't just a rhythm game – it's a beautifully crafted story, and a feast for the eyes and ears. Every flashy pixelated graphic or stutter in the beat plays into the overall narrative, evoking emotions I didn't know were possible from this genre. If development continues this way, *Rhythm Doctor* will solidify itself as one of the best rhythm games ever.

Mollie Taylor

PLAYED IT



Like those clickbait mobile ads, except the gameplay's real.

## ALL THEIR TREATMENTS COME IN THE FORM OF THE SINGLE-BUTTON GAMEPLAY



## HROT



The action sequences really get the blood pumping.

### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15.50

**DEVELOPER**  
SpytihnDv

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/HROTGame](http://bit.ly/HROTGame)

## HROT

Dive into the sewers for some retro first-person shooting

**I**t's not a popular opinion, but I love a good sewer level. All those rusted grates and walkways, and gallons of sloshing, suspect water. It's where industry meets the underworld, and *HROT* is especially good at it. A good chunk of this Early Access FPS is set in the bowels of its apocalyptic Czechoslovakia.

Not just sewers, but metro tunnels and catacombs, and each is oppressive, claustrophobic, and stuffed to the gills with monsters and hidden surprises. You find the gold key for the gold door, and then a wall opens from nowhere and a masked pigman waddles out of it, grunting as he launches a ricocheting grenade. This is *Doom*, but mostly *Quake*: a convincing, retro-styled FPS rendered with jagged, low-res textures and every available shade of the colour brown. The guns feel great, the double-barrelled shotgun feels *great*, and you skate around each boxy murder-maze with the appropriate amount of speed.

One of the things I like best in old shooters is the extraordinary level of interactivity. The developers took the time to model a toilet, so why not let the player flush it? Why not let them hack it to bits? And, hell, let's hide some shotgun shells in the U-bend while we're at it. You'd better believe *HROT* has flushable (and smashable) toilets, but it also includes a football pitch and snooker table, a drivable motorbike, and other surprises you should really discover for yourself. For all its bleakness, its Soviet Union-era drabness,

PLAYED IT

*HROT* is a game with a devious sense of humour. And necessarily so, I think. Without these little jabs and gags to temporarily relieve the tension, it could almost be too much.

### TOO HROT TO HANDLE

Of course monsters spawn right behind you, at the precise moment you clunk a switch. But I wasn't expecting a gang to appear immediately after a boss fight, in a hilariously cruel twisting of the knife. Every level feels authored – not just a maze full of keys and monsters – with the action swelling and subsiding, before it builds again to a crescendo. It's a surprisingly modern approach to first-person action.

Just as it swings between horror and comedy, from catacomb spiders to crude toilet humour, so *HROT* is equally keen to swerve from its claustrophobic underworld to the city above. I think it's set in Prague – or a version of Prague populated by hazmat-wearing zombies, missile-flinging floating heads, and rampaging horses – and there's a suitable slab of brutalism in its boxlike architecture. Dreary tower blocks rub shoulders with grim municipal buildings, dismal parks with boarded-up shopfronts, and everything is drowning in a sea of muddy, soupy brown.

But while there's little variation in the colour palette, *HROT*'s levels will take you all over the shop. A typical stage will encompass a building, its underneath, and a section of city around it, and have you looping back on yourself in pleasing ways. Keys and weapons are teased behind blocked passageways, in classic retro style. And when you finally locate them, obviously it's all the more satisfying – these are classic game design principles, and they work well here.

It took me about five hours to finish *HROT*'s first episode, and I'm excited that two more episodes are planned. For now, there's also a horde mode (set in one of the maps featuring the motorbike), as well as an option to replay levels with randomised enemies and pickups. *HROT* barely seems Early Access, given how polished it feels, but with two more episodes on the way, I'm hardly going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Even if it is charging at me with a gasmask on.

Tom Sykes

**YOU'D BETTER BELIEVE HROT HAS FLUSHABLE (AND SMASHABLE) TOILETS**



*HROT* swings masterfully from humour to horror.





There's a drivable bike, which actually handles pretty well.



The guns feel great, and there are quite a few of them.



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# PC SPECIALIST



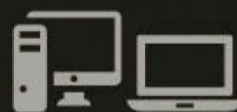
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COVER FEATURE

*Genshin Impact*

# WIND BRACE





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T

How Chinese free-to-play RPG  
**GENSHIN IMPACT** conquered the world.  
By Steven Messner



## COVER FEATURE

### Genshin Impact

W

hen *Genshin Impact* launched last year, no one saw its huge success coming. It was obviously pretty, sure, but it was also easy to write off as another Chinese free-to-play mobile game filled with microtransactions and high-pitched fairy sidekicks. What wasn't apparent was how it would transcend the negative stereotypes, pulling inspiration from beloved classics like *Nier: Automata* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*

to create an RPG that manages to feel both nostalgic and innovative. Or how its developer, MiHoYo, would come to exemplify China's evolving games industry.

In the span of just a few months, MiHoYo has become one of China's most prestigious gaming companies. And since its 2020 launch, *Genshin Impact* has raked in an estimated \$874 million and still continues to pull in around \$175 million a month – and that's just from mobile players alone. To put that in perspective, it took *Fortnite's* mobile version nearly two years to cross the billion dollar threshold. *Genshin Impact* is not only fantastic, it's also the biggest global launch of a Chinese game in history. Not bad for a company that, just a decade ago, was made up of just three anime nerds who were fresh out of university.



Enter

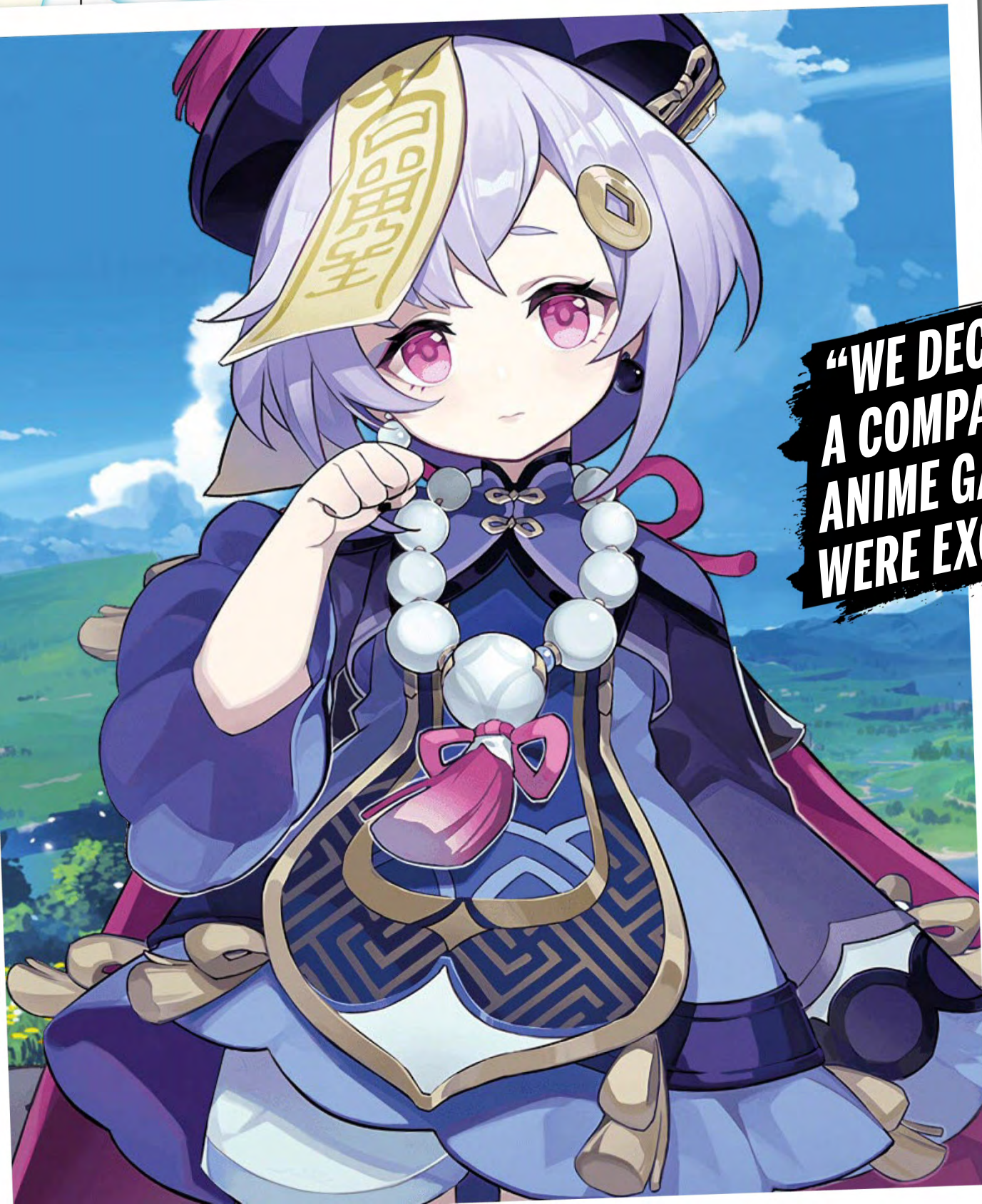
[Kyuwu] doing quests  
[Aria] oh we can't do those in  
coop :(  
[Kyuwu] i have to put these  
rock things somewhere

“WE DECIDED TO CREATE  
A COMPANY TO MAKE  
ANIME GAMES THAT  
WERE EXCITING FOR US”

#### OTAKUS SAVE THE WORLD

If you started reading this and had to flip back to the front cover to double-check that this was still PC Gamer, I don't blame you. But don't be deceived by its roots in mobile games; *Genshin Impact* is a big step toward a future where games are free from the barriers of your chosen gaming platform. A future where big-budget open world RPGs look virtually indistinguishable between their PC and mobile versions. And all this started because MiHoYo's three founders, Cai Haoyu, Liu Wei and Luo Yuhao *really* love anime.

“Our inspiration was born from our passion for technology and [anime, comics and gaming] culture,







and we wanted to share this passion with the world,” Cai tells me. “The other reason was we didn’t see many anime-style games that really intrigued us, so we decided to create a company to make anime games that were exciting for us.”

Traditionally a Japanese word for socially-incapable dorks obsessed with anime, Cai, Wei and Luo have turned ‘otaku’ into a badge of honour. It’s baked right into MiHoYo’s slogan “Tech otakus save the world”.

That emphasis on games for otakus, by otakus came to define MiHoYo’s first few games. Before the company was even officially founded,

the trio released *FlyMe2theMoon*, a simple mobile game where you control a cutesy anime girl with a jetpack, gliding through twisting levels to collect gems and stars. But even the release of MiHoYo’s earliest mobile games like undead brawlers *Zombiegal Kawaii* and *Guns GirlZ* demonstrated two things: a shrewd awareness of what was popular in gaming (both games came out around the time that zombie survival games like *DayZ* were exploding) and a knack for killer art.

Early on, Cai explains, MiHoYo found success by sticking to what it knew. Instead of following the trend

**ABOVE:** There’s even the option to play co-op, though it’s relatively limited.

of a lot of popular Chinese free-to-play games, which were competitive but also flagrantly pay-to-win, MiHoYo went in a different direction. It gambled everything on otakus’ thirst for anime girls. “In the early years of our company, we sought to make products for a rather niche market and user demographic,” Cai explains. “Our team was also still very small at the time, so we narrowed our focus to a specific player base.”

During the China Games Industry Annual Conference in 2017, Liu described this approach as “paying for love”. The philosophy was simple: if you make the girls cute and

## WAIFOGRAPHY *A quick overview of MiHoYo’s previous games*



### FLYME2THEMOON 2011

A simple, cutesy mobile game similar to *Flappy Bird*. Collect stuff, avoid the obstacles, reach the end of the level.



### ZOMBIEGAL KAWAII 2012

Sidescrolling shooter where you play chibi anime girls with guns fighting off big packs of ravenous zombies.



### HONKAI IMPACT 3RD 2016

MiHoYo’s first breakout hit, *Honkai Impact 3rd* is a character-action game that combines tons of genres.



### GUNS GIRLZ 2014

*Guns GirlZ* is a spiritual sequel to *Zombiegal Kawaii*, with more story and characters to fill out the experience.



### TEARS OF THEMIS 2020

MiHoYo’s first ‘otome’ game, a visual novel or dating sim geared toward women. Not available in English yet.





» personable enough, players will pay out the nose to unlock them. But as MiHoYo grew and took on more ambitious games, Cai said that mission broadened too. MiHoYo's flair for character design didn't have to appeal only to thirsty dudes. But despite a rapidly swelling audience, the studio was still struggling – like most Chinese developers – to make games that appealed to an audience outside of Asia.

## LEVELLING UP

It's not news that gaming is a big deal in China, but it's important to realise just how big it really is. Analysts predict that soon there'll be more PC gamers in China than the total population of the United States, and PC gaming is just one slice of a larger gaming pie that is mostly made up of mobile gamers. But despite being a \$40 billion industry, it's also one of the most regulated in the world.

Before any game can be sold in China, for example, the government requires it to undergo a rigorous censorship process that can take *months* to complete – and if your game is overly violent, sexy, or features anything from political commentary to occult magic, it runs a decent risk of being rejected. The mobile version of *PlayerUnknown's Battleground*, for example, was infamously remade into *Game For Peace*, a pro-China reskin where players politely wave goodbye after you shoot them in the face. That kind of censorship has created a desperate need to make games that don't just rely on the volatile Chinese market, but the obstacles are just as daunting.

It's not just that games need proper localisation or themes that appeal to players outside of China, either. China's game development scene is also undergoing rapid 'industrialisation' as Daniel Ahmad, a

**TOP:** *Genshin's* story is typical JRPG nonsense, and yes that's good.

**BELOW:** You can almost feel the seasonal allergies.

senior analyst at Niko Partners, tells me. For years, Chinese developers were stuck either making free-to-play MMOs and pay-to-win mobile games or working as outsourced mercenaries for big-budget studios outside of China. Even Ubisoft's Shanghai studio, founded in 1996, was mostly a helping hand for the main teams in Montreal and Toronto.

Because all the money was in mobile games or MMOs, China's games industry was a lot more homogenous than in other countries. The indie explosion that took the global games industry by storm around 2010 was just a gentle breeze to most Chinese developers. But that's changing as the industry matures and new technologies like Unity, the consumer-grade game engine *Genshin Impact* is built on, become more ubiquitous. "We're now in a position where Chinese game developers are able to reach [all kinds of] players," Ahmad explains. "Not just on mobile in China or globally, as it had been for the past few years, but also now on PC and console to the same extent as Western developers."

On PC, that means regularly seeing new Chinese indie games dominate Steam's top-seller charts, like *Dyson Sphere Program* and *Tale of Immortal*. But it also means independent Chinese developers, like MiHoYo, finally have the talent and tools to compete with the world's most popular studios. All MiHoYo needed was a killer game that could appeal to as many players on as many different platforms as possible.

## CLONE WARS

If there's a secret sauce to all of MiHoYo's games, it's that each





liberally swipes ideas from a variety of beloved genres and games. *Honkai Impact 3rd*, which released on PC in 2019, is literally the kitchen sink of games: a hack-'n'-slash RPG that also somehow manages to incorporate everything from bullet hell shoot-'em-ups and MMOs to dating sims.

*Genshin Impact* is a more focused experience, but a big part of its initial appeal was its similarity to other games. Not everyone found its imitation flattering, though. When *Genshin Impact* was first announced, players were incensed by its obvious similarities to *Breath of the Wild*. In addition to a ton of online backlash, one player went so far as to smash his PlayStation 4 in public at the ChinaJoy gaming convention in protest. Cai says the team never saw the outrage coming.

"Honestly, we were quite surprised," he says. "Although we had various betas before the game's official global release in September 2020, only a small number of players were actually invited. So, given that most people hadn't personally experienced our game yet, it's only natural that there were some misconceptions and misjudgments."

*Genshin Impact* was never meant to be a malicious clone, riding on the coattails of more popular games. It was a love letter to them. "I remember that the *Breath of the Wild* developers gave a presentation at the 2017 Game Developers Conference where they shared their thoughts behind the design of the world, gameplay, and art style of the game," Cai remembers.

"For instance, they talked about turning a passive game into an active game. An example of this was removing the barriers created by walls so that players could go anywhere they saw on the map. Another example was how the ability to glide from high places using the paraglider greatly increased the freedom of movement for players. Such designs implemented alongside

a multitude of actions and areas gave birth to limitless possibilities for gameplay and exploration. This approach had a big influence on us when we set out to create the open world of *Genshin Impact*."

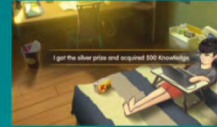
### BREATH OF THE WAIFU

Those misconceptions were short-lived once *Genshin Impact* actually came out. While some might scoff at a game willing to shamelessly borrow *Breath of the Wild*'s most innovative features, many more players were just excited to be able to play a game that had that Nintendo level of quality without needing a Switch. And *Genshin Impact* is also so much more than a mere *Breath of the Wild* clone.

Cai says the team also took notes from *Grand Theft Auto V* – if you can believe it – in how to deliver story exposition without forcing the player into a long cutscenes traditional to

## PICKING UP STEAM

*Steam has become a haven for Chinese games. Here's three you should check out*



### CHINESE PARENTS

One of the first notable breakouts on Steam, *Chinese Parents* is a clever and charming life sim about the modern pressures of growing up in China.



### GUJIAN 3

A sprawling and epic action RPG that has a lot in common with *The Witcher 3*, *Gujian 3* is a 'xianxia' RPG about divine beings, martial arts, and cosmic wars between spirits.



### AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR

It's like *Rimworld* except instead of building a colony on an alien planet you start a martial arts school and ascend your character to godhood.



**"IT'S ONLY NATURAL THAT THERE WERE SOME MISCONCEPTIONS AND MISJUDGMENTS"**



## COVER FEATURE

### *Genshin Impact*

» JRPGs. MiHoYo also studied *The Elder Scrolls* for how to design good open-world quests, while its melee combat clearly took lessons from *Nier: Automata*.

But at the heart of *Genshin Impact*'s genius is its eclectic and ever-growing cast of characters. Drawing upon all the lessons learned from its previous games, *Genshin*'s anime roster is immediately lovable and surprisingly family friendly when you consider the company's original mission to cater to horny boys. Cai explains that the process of designing these new characters is extremely intensive, each one taking about nine months, "The most challenging part of making a character comes down to one question in the end: how do we create a character that players will like? No one can guarantee that the character you create will be popular, but what we can do is improve through a constant process of

creation, experimentation, feedback, absorption and then creation again."

#### GROWING STRONGER

It's a loop that MiHoYo has been practicing since its very first game, and it's hard to overstate how good it's become at making loveable anime goofs. But *Genshin Impact*'s appeal isn't *just* its characters. It's due to how so many of its strengths fit together to create a game that feels like it should cost \$60 but is instead completely free. That I can play it on my PC and then jump over to playing on my phone seamlessly makes *Genshin Impact* astounding. Even its microtransactions, though sometimes annoying, are entirely optional.

"It's more based around paying for things that you want as opposed to paying for things that you need," Daniel Ahmad explains. "What that means is that you can essentially play *Genshin Impact* for free for a really



long time. There's no real pressure, at least in the first 30 hours of the game, to pay for anything."

In hindsight, it's no wonder that *Genshin Impact* has become as popular as it is. But the ace up MiHoYo's sleeve is that it's just getting started.

#### ONLY THE BEGINNING

Since *Genshin Impact* launched last year, it has already had four major updates adding new characters, limited-time events, quests, bosses and even a new region. And all of that has come at a rapid pace that puts many other live-service games to shame. Its most recent update, for



"IT WILL TAKE YEARS  
TO TELL THE FULL  
STORY OF  
GENSHIN IMPACT"





example, will add a massive festival alongside a new dating sim-style mode where players can spend one-on-one time with different characters to unlock unique rewards. But *Genshin Impact's* world is also a lot bigger than the two regions of Mondstadt and Liyue that are currently in the game.

"Rather than focusing on our short-term performance in the game market since release, I pay more attention to whether or not players will be able to continue enjoying our game in the future," Cai says.

"Actually, this is related to our long-term operation strategy: When we started work on *Genshin Impact*, we had already decided that there would be seven regions, of which we have only released two so far. It will take years to tell the full story of *Genshin Impact*."

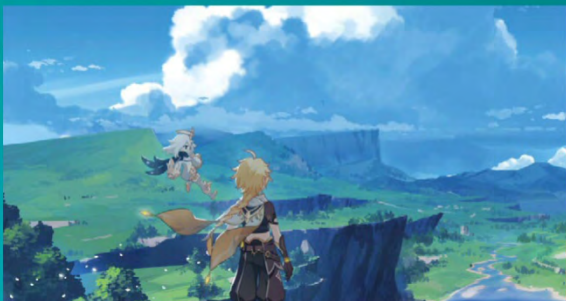
And that is just a sliver of Cai's vision for the future. Now that China is primed to deliver more global hits, *Genshin Impact* and MiHoYo are going to have to rapidly evolve to keep pace, and Cai has an ambitious idea of what that might entail.

**ABOVE:** *Genshin's* combat is fast and vicious, so you'll need a good party.

"We believe that the virtual world is the future of humanity and technological development," he says. "There are so many possibilities and fun things to be found in the virtual world which simply can't be achieved in the real world – the virtual world makes the impossible possible. We hope that as technology continues to develop, we can create a virtual world for our players and users where infinite unknowns and possibilities await, a world that can bring them more joy. I suppose this is what can be considered as our mission." ■

## JUST GENSHIN STARTED

*Genshin Impact is big, but MiHoYo has plans to add around five new regions. Here's the ones already available*



### MONDSTADT

Pastoral fields surrounding a medieval kingdom terrorised by an evil dragon, Mondstadt is maybe a little *too* similar to Hyrule, but it sure is pretty.



### LIYUE

*Genshin's* visual potential comes to life in this country inspired by ancient China, complete with terraced villages, mountains, and a resplendent coastal city.



### DRAGONSPINE

The latest zone added to the game, Dragonspine is a frigid mountain wasteland where players have to fight to keep warm or else freeze to death.



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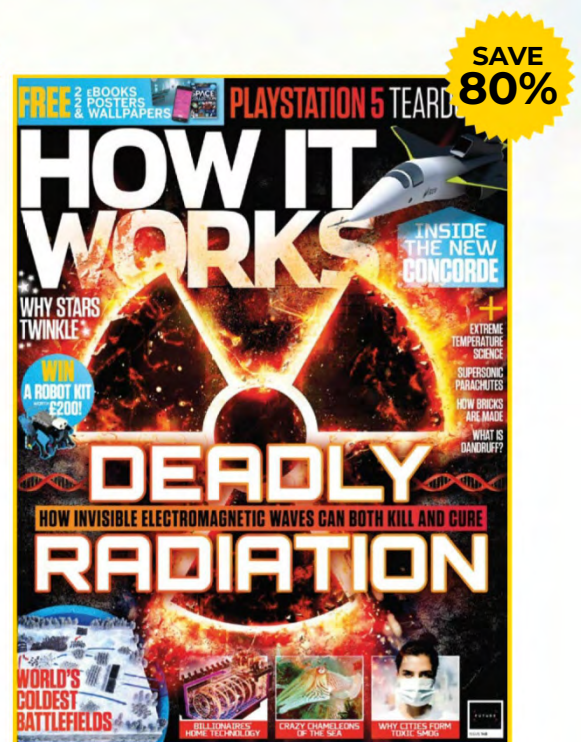
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A person wearing a light-colored hoodie is seen from the chest up, sitting at a desk and using a laptop. The person's face is obscured by deep shadows. The entire scene is bathed in a blue light. Overlaid on the image is a network of thin red lines connecting several red circular nodes. One node is near the top left, another near the top right, and a third near the bottom right. A large red circle is centered in the lower half of the image, containing the main text.

What turns  
communities toxic?  
What makes fans  
abuse community  
managers? It's a matter  
of psychology.

*By Luke Kemp*



# GROUPS OF WRATH



W

When I speak to Will Overgard, he's enthusiastic, friendly, and immediately likable; attributes which serve him well on Twitch, where he streams as Viking Blonde. Bursting with energy, he gleefully chats with me about his previous life in the games industry working for companies including Creative Assembly, Improbable, and RocketWerkz. I warm to him within seconds. So why did three total strangers once wish him death by cancer? Why does *anybody* on the internet suffer threats and hatred from people they don't know? The answer (for community managers I've spoken to, at least) is complicated, and leads me to realise that you and I aren't as many steps away from such behaviour as we may like to believe.

Take another, particularly horrifying example of harassment that Will gave me: "A group of individuals came up with a horrible story involving children," he says. "They leapt into the YouTube comments and started telling the story at each other, like 'Oh, did you hear the story of Will doing this horrible thing?' 'Oh, I did hear that, but did you hear *this* fact?' 'No, I did not hear that, did you hear this fact?' And they tell this horrific story in the comments, and then upvote each other."

There's no shortage of people within the industry with similar horror stories. Today, James Bartholomeou works at PR firm Ico Partners, but for two years he was a community manager at Focus Home Interactive. Like any job, it involved both highs and lows, but one of the worst times was when a highly anticipated game he was looking after was repeatedly delayed. This infuriated some members of the community so much, things took a dark turn. "Eventually it got to the point where we were getting death threats," James says, with a casualness that actually shocks me. "I

think I'm quite lucky in that I only got a few too, especially talking to other colleagues."

### THREAT BOARD

But *why*? How do people become so vicious towards complete strangers managing the community of a videogame? It's worth noting that every community manager I spoke to told me that they never experienced any such vile behaviour at in-person events, nor would they ever expect to. It's no secret that online anonymity lends people the confidence to say and do things they'd never repeat in person, but there's another anonymity at play, too – that of the videogame developers themselves.

Dr Alison Lamont is a lecturer in sociology and criminology at the University of Roehampton, and she's conducted extensive research into the behaviour of online communities. "I think [community managers are] not seen as individual human beings," she tells me. "It is a corporation that people are attacking and, you know, the way capitalism is we are very often at the wrong end of corporations and profit seeking. And, yeah, it becomes, you know, fair

### PROFILE



**WILL OVERGARD**  
Twitch streamer and former community manager.



**ABOVE LEFT:** After a few *Black Ops II* multiplayer tweaks, design director David Vonderhaar received death threats.



**LEFT:** Minecraft is so phenomenally popular, it has both the best and the worst of communities.





**THERE'S NO SHORTAGE  
OF PEOPLE WITHIN THE  
INDUSTRY WITH SIMILAR  
HORROR STORIES**

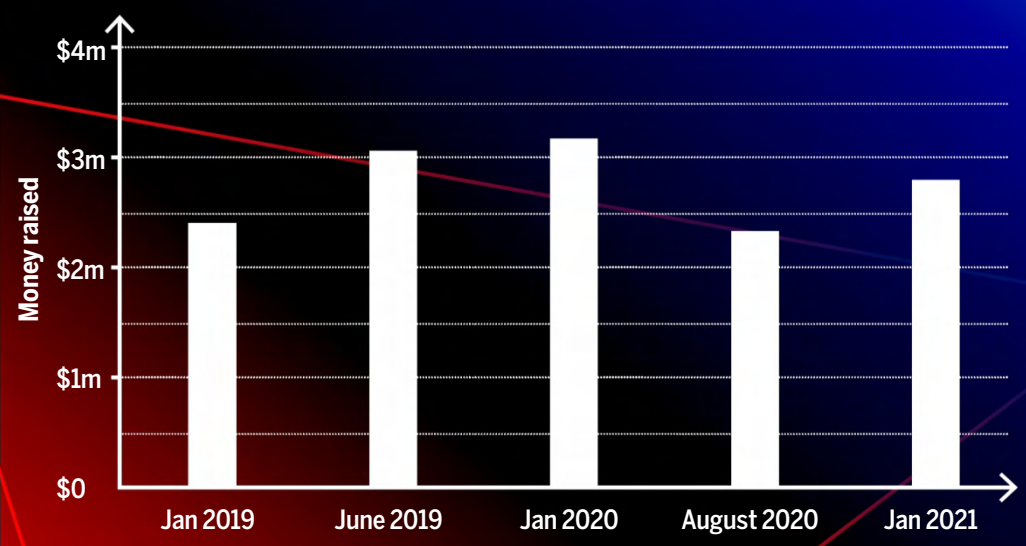
game. 'Alright, why don't I just fire off some angry comments to these people who must be making loads of money?'" As Dr Lamont points out, community managers do *not* make loads of money. "I think this is getting into the issues with online communication ... [the] asynchronous aspect of it. It's not a real-time conversation. It's not connected, you don't see the whole of somebody's life so you tell yourself 'I'll write this horrible message, but it's OK because they're in a really privileged position.'"

#### **UNFAIR COMMENT**

As tempting as it is to think that the likes of death threats and vile insults aren't delivered at in-person events

## **GAMES DONE QUICK**

*Communities can be great; money raised by GDQ's events*







» due to cowardice, this is a gross oversimplification that entirely bypasses the psychology that is at play. If you meet (for example) a member of a videogame development team for the first time, you have a real human person in front of you, and you act accordingly. If you're replying to some text on screen, or if you're typing out something to an avatar on Twitter or a forum, you're not talking with someone. You're talking *at* some *thing*. At best, you're directing your thoughts to a construct in your head, a construct with no available evidence to prove or disprove its accuracy.

The opaque nature of game development was often cited to me as exacerbating existing problems,

inflating grievances because communities don't understand how games are made. And how could they, if nobody is telling them? One example of a negative community reaction cited to me by just about everybody I spoke to, including Dr Lamont, was Hello Games' *No Man's Sky*, and the ferocious backlash it suffered when the finished product didn't match the initial reveal. Game development is iterative, with multiple changes along the way par for the course. With none of this visible between announcement and launch, many people had been expecting a game that matched the very first trailer precisely.

There's anecdotal evidence that being transparent about

## PROFILE



**MAX DOWNTON**  
Senior brand manager at Splash Damage.

development, and putting names and faces to individual members of a development team, can minimise toxicity within a community. Max Downton is senior brand manager at Splash Damage. While he's no stranger to negative behaviour in communities, his experience has largely been a positive one, something he attributes in part to encouraging transparency in the development process.

## GIT GUD BEHAVIOUR

"One of the things that I was really pushing the company to do is to actually put names and faces out into the public," Max tells me. "I've always believed that by putting out names and faces you can undercut



# TOXICITY IS NOT A VIDEOGAME PROBLEM – IT IS ACTUALLY A HUMAN PROBLEM

## THREE SPEECH

*There actually are some lovely communities out there*



### DARK SOULS TRILOGY

Sure, you can invade (and be invaded by) other players, but there's no shortage of friendly *Souls* fans willing to help others within the community.



### STARDEW VALLEY

With a subreddit full of joy and fanart, it's little surprise that the 2021 five-year anniversary saw gratitude from developer and community alike.



### SEA OF THIEVES

It's become so popular, the presence of some bad eggs is inevitable, but there's no shortage of friendly pirates willing to sail you through the basics.

any of that kind of anonymous hatred, because I think my belief was that people would find it much more difficult to be hostile and aggressive and rude to a human."

It's important to remember that toxicity is not a videogame problem – it is a human problem. Dr Lamont surprises me by telling me that similar behaviour arises in fine art communities. "Some of it's horrendous," she says. "People have had exhibitions close down, people have had serious talks with funders about whether or not the funders are still happy to support an exhibition...

this is an internet communication issue, I think, much more than it is a videogame issue."

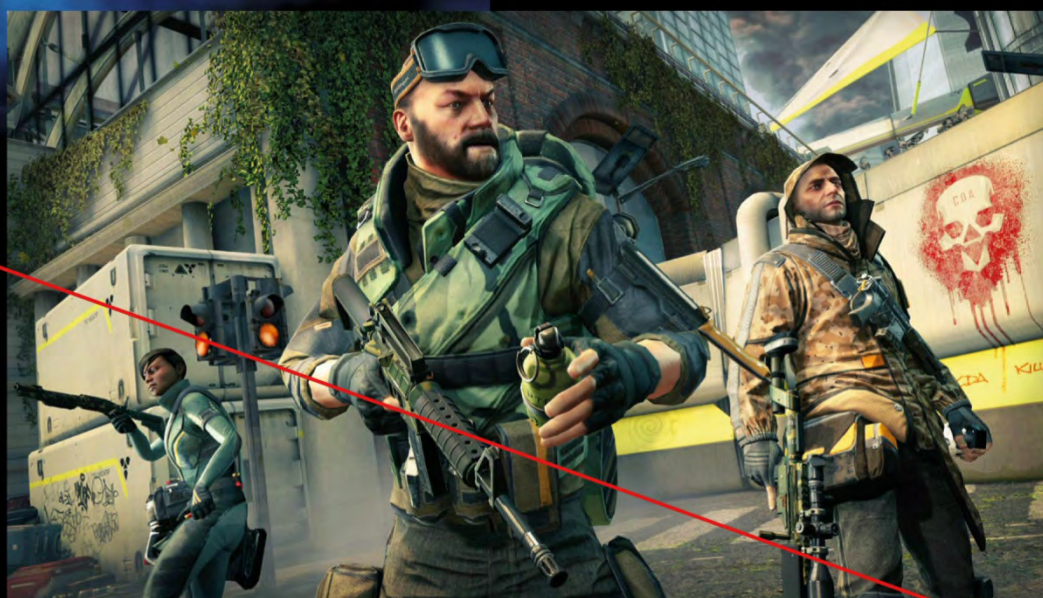
Toxic, poisonous behaviour is – whether we like it or not – a very human thing that will never go away. For all the good that it's brought to the world, modern technology – and specifically the internet – has proven to be the ideal breeding ground for the darker side of human nature. Once you sever the human connection, reducing other people to words and images on a silent screen, negative behaviour is never very far away. Most of us would never dream of intentionally hurting a stranger, but a cold and distant bundle of words that say something we don't like? So what? In this way, the internet combines dehumanisation with an unprecedented ease to doing harm to create something quite sinister. Referencing the book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* by Whitney Phillips, Dr Lamont considers the example of the YouTube comments attack on Will in the context of trolling.

## ROCK AND TROLL

"For some people, that is entertainment, just seeing somebody get worked up and knowing that they can't touch you and they can't get back at what you're saying. I think that ultimately that's what the dynamic probably is.

"You could sit with a friend and chat and say it would be hilarious to have a go with this guy and just watch him lose his temper online, and there's nothing [they] can do about it. 'Let's do it!' I can't think of a non-virtual forum which would enable you to do that so fluidly."

You would perhaps expect that being part of a group would keep everybody in check, nobody wanting to embarrass themselves in front of their peers. The opposite is true,



**ABOVE RIGHT:** Splash Damage, developers of *Dirty Bomb*, strove for transparency to prevent community toxicity.

**RIGHT:** *The Sims* community is full of people sharing jokes, mods, screenshots, and stories.





## Groups of Wrath

» however. Sometimes, when negative behaviour begins in a community, it's easy for it to spread if it is not very quickly stamped out – and people can begin to engage in behaviour they otherwise never would have. It could happen to any of us, given the right circumstances.

Dr Dean Burnett is a neuroscientist and author who's written about everything from mental health, to why you can walk into a room and then forget why you went there. He explains the potential for extreme behaviour within groups in terms of something that is called group polarisation. "We're social creatures, but we're also very hierarchical, we are really concerned with status, we want to be respected by others, we want them to look up to us or like us... the main way we do it is to earn the approval of the group. So if you have a group that is consistent in that we all think this one thing, we all believe this thing... you try to embody the group beliefs as much as possible."

Nonetheless, there's no reason to give people who engage in hateful behaviour a free pass. Repugnant personal beliefs can certainly play a part. When I asked community managers if there were any issues more likely than others to spark controversy or toxic behaviour, I was time and again told that introducing any kind of diversity – or even acknowledging that it exists – was a point of contention for toxic elements. Max tells me of one innocuous example that resulted in some pushback.

### TOXIC CRUSADERS

"We did a video series called Ask Splash," he says, "which was, like I was saying, about putting faces out there, with their job title and people talking about what their role is and what their favourite games are. And



one of the first videos that we did just so happened to be an International Women's Day video. And it's so inoffensive, it's just 'here's a bunch of women who work at Splash Damage, here's what they do'. And I think one woman said 'you know, in my experience, it has been kind of difficult sometimes for these reasons'. Obviously, that garners negative reaction."

"Some people point towards ideas of masculinity," says Dr Lamont, "and the idea that gaming communities have become, or were originally seen as, very male spaces which are now

## BEING FACED WITH EXTREME NEGATIVITY AND HARASSMENT CAN TAKE A TOLL

### TRIPLE TROUBLE

*These launches were memorable for all the wrong reasons*



#### NO MAN'S SKY

The game was far from what was seen in the first trailer, and players were not shy about yelling at Hello Games about it. They weren't loving the alien.



#### CYBERPUNK 2077

A vicious, vocal minority of fans defended the game with toxic behaviour prior to release – then turned their anger onto CDPR when the game arrived.



#### FALLOUT 76

Some fans were ferocious when Fallout's take on MMOs launched buggy, a situation that Bethesda's reluctance to comment on only made worse.

**TOP:** Getting just five matches of *Rainbow Six Siege* in a row without teamkills is depressingly tricky.

**ABOVE:** Creative Assembly (*Total War*) is just one studio where Will served as community manager.

being infiltrated by non-white, non-male players, and that kind of defensiveness again that goes back into this idea of identity and trying to protect an identity, [regardless of] the validity of that identity."

Community managers are individual, real, human beings; and being faced with extreme negativity and harassment can take a toll. In February, videogame charity Safe In Our World announced a free mental health training programme for community managers. James is incredibly happy to see the initiative. "It's huge, and I'm surprised it wasn't done earlier," he says. "I left community management because of harassment and stress. I started having stress ulcers." Hopefully, this





course will be the first of many such initiatives to come.

Despite the negativity and often terrible consequences, there's still a positive side to game communities, something that everybody I spoke to was keen to emphasise. James, in fact, provided one example that stood out to me. It's his belief that niche games are more likely to foster positive communities, something that he saw with *Spintires: MudRunner*.

### TRUCKING AROUND

"[People like to] drive their own trucks [which they own in real life]. You would have people come into the group and say 'Hey, I'd like to buy *Spintires: MudRunner*, but I noticed it doesn't have...' whatever truck they

had, and you would have modders be like 'Oh, I'll do that for you.'"

Although they get lost in amongst the headline-grabbing negativity, gaming communities are dotted with little acts of kindness like this all over, which can even extend to more meaningful help such as with medical bills. The positive, as with the negative, can be explained in sociological terms. As Dr Lamont explains, "With the emergence of this always-on interconnectivity comes the possibility to have an awful lot of weak social ties with lots and lots of different people," she says. "You can pull a lot of energy and resources through that ... [if] you're tapping into your gamer connections nobody's going to donate, say, £100,

### PROFILE



**ALISON LAMONT**  
Lecturer in sociology  
and criminology at  
the University of  
Roehampton.

because they don't know you that well, but you might know 100 people who all chip in £1."

Ultimately, the benefits of online communities of all kinds in the modern world outweigh the drawbacks, something we should remember. As Dr Burnett tells me, they are "giving people a sense of community, a sense of status, a sense of appreciation, friends... These are fundamentally important parts of what the human brain requires. I think hopefully, through [the pandemic] will be a reappraisal of whether online relationships or online connections are valid or not, because clearly they are keeping people afloat and that should be acknowledged in the future". ■



# TRUE BLOOD

Guts, grapples, and  
Goro – director Simon  
McQuoid hopes to  
bring a faithful vision of  
**MORTAL KOMBAT** to the  
silver screen.

*By Robin Valentine*





T

he relationship between film and games has always felt... frayed.

There's a sense that Hollywood

doesn't quite understand this medium of ours – and there are so many failed game-to-film adaptations in the rear view that it's hard to take a new one seriously.

The new *Mortal Kombat* film, due in the spring this year, is... well, it's not necessarily set to change that situation much. It's not shaping up to be a movie with grand, serious ambitions, or Oscars twinkling in its eyes. But it does look like a film that actually understands its source material – not just in terms of story and characters, but in spirit.

"I said it to everyone who came on board

'We are not changing the DNA [of *Mortal Kombat*],' explains director Simon McQuoid. "And the DNA is built out of a few different, really key ingredients. There's a brutality. There's a sense of humour that runs through it. There's a sort of epic world-building, a nobility and respect for its serious canon. And there's a thread of silly."

We see all of that in the first official trailer; a whirlwind of violence, dark humour, and cheesiness that does immediately feel like something out of the more recent games' cinematic story modes. With

its rapid-fire character reveals and fan-pleasing moments – including Liu Kang performing his memorable (and ridiculous) fire dragon summoning move – it feels like a statement of intent as much as a taste of things to come. Particularly so in its deployment of blood and gore.

### BLOOD SIMPLE

Violence is perhaps *the* most iconic part of that *Mortal Kombat* DNA. More so even than ninjas, Outworld and 'Get over here!', it's the fatalities that the series is known for, both among fans and in the wider world. And yet the '90s MK movies were PG-13s, with nary a spine-rip in sight.

Not so here. In the trailer alone

we see impalings, throats slit, a heart torn out, arms exploded, and a man impaled with a knife made out of his own frozen blood. Thanks to the film's

## A WHIRLWIND OF VIOLENCE, DARK HUMOUR, AND CHEESINESS

R-rating, the violence looks more gorily faithful to the games than any fan could have dreamed. And despite the risks conventionally accepted to come with making an R-rated movie – "it's sort of obvious, you're limiting, not expanding, your audience", as McQuoid puts it – that was an element the producers at New Line were committed to even before the director was brought on board.

"I think the guys at New Line realised very early on that, actually, there was great power in that, and it was worthwhile to do it that way," says McQuoid. "Those guys were





## True Blood

» really interested in making something unique, something that really respected the material. And that's what I wanted to do too."

With that mission statement in mind, McQuoid began the production by "going back to *Mortal Kombat* University", putting in the research to really understand the series. In fact, that effort never stopped throughout the project. "It's so dense and rich – there's so much to know. I don't profess to know everything!" he says. "We really, really, really tried our best to get it as authentic and truthful and respectful of the *Mortal Kombat* canon as possible.

"So, you know, I read a lot, I played the games, I watched countless YouTube clips. And we were just constantly doing that, through the whole process of the film. We never stopped looking, searching, finding things out. It wasn't like I did it to start with, then I was fine. You can't stop. There's too much to know."

### TIME TO KILL

Much of it pretty convoluted, it must be admitted. Over decades of games,

that canon McQuoid is keen to be respectful to has tied itself into knots anyone would have trouble unpicking. The most recent three games, the most story-heavy of the series to date, used multiple kinds of time travel to soft reboot the setting and create brilliantly over-the-top fan-pleasing moments. In the process, they created a timeline so tangled that the only appropriate medium for

explaining it would be thread and pins on a conspiracist's corkboard.

A truly faithful recreation of *Mortal Kombat*'s story is probably too much to ask

for, then – especially in a form that could be palatable to a movie-going audience, perhaps not familiar with the origins of the Cyber Lin Kuei, the corruption of the Jinsei, or who 'Blaze' is. McQuoid chose to focus instead on being faithful to the identities of that story's key players – the film features Raiden, Kano, Sonya, Jax, Liu Kang, Kung Lao, Kano, Shang Tsung, Shao Kahn, Subzero, Scorpion, Goro, Mileena, and more, and each is immediately recognisable even from a few seconds of footage.

**"IT'S REALLY THE CHARACTERS THAT SORT OF BIND IT ALL TOGETHER"**



**ABOVE:** Liu Kang, played by Ludi Lin.

**BELOW:** This is McQuoid's first feature – but he's directed action-packed adverts for Sony, Activision, and Microsoft.

"It's really the characters that sort of bind it all together," says McQuoid. "So in pre-production we had this huge room, and in that room each character had a giant wall of their own with every single iteration of how they've ever looked on the wall.

"What was very important to me was taking these characters and elevating them to be sort of real but powerful, in a considered, respectful way. And certain things with the costumes don't really work [in film]. You cannot let it end up feeling like [a] Halloween party, right? Everything has to have this sort of richness of detail and layering and so forth.

"So each character had their wall, and then we looked at it and said 'OK, so what are they about? What's the throughline here? What are the commonalities? Where have they taken license in the past? What we can't do is come out with some crazy, weird interpretation, it has to be rooted in the truth that's in all these aspects of where these characters have been."

### HOT AND COLE

It's perhaps a surprise, then, that the film actually introduces an entirely new character to serve as its protagonist. Cole Young, played by Lewis Tan, is a down-on-his-luck MMA fighter who just happens to have a birthmark in the shape of the *Mortal Kombat* dragon logo – something that seemingly makes him







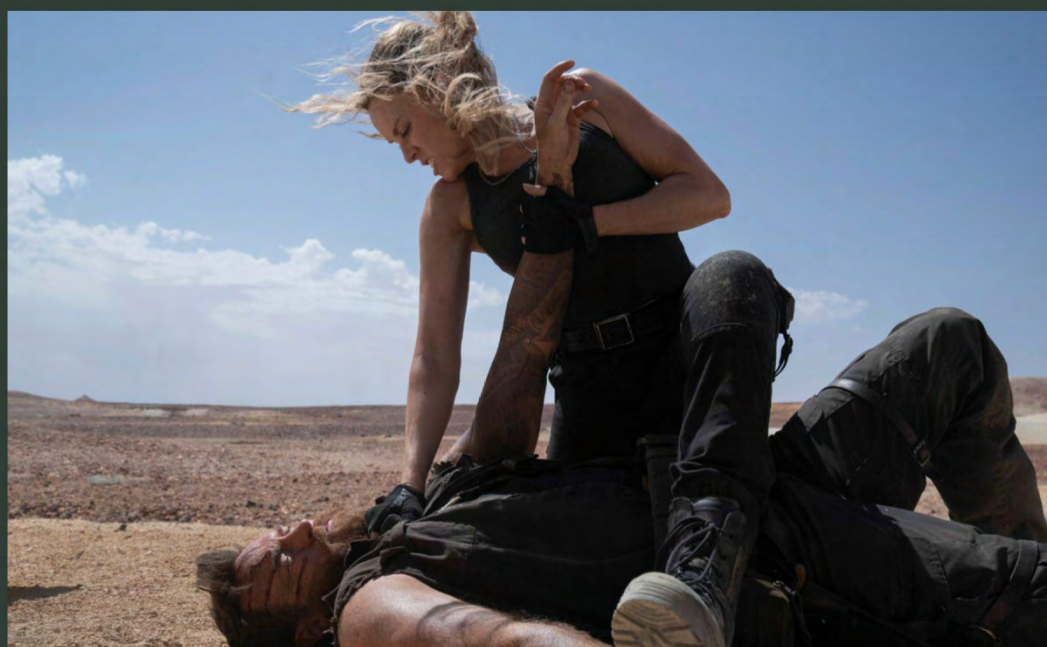
predestined to fight in the tournament, or else be hunted by Subzero and the Lin Kuei. Teaming up with the champions of Earthrealm, he's the newbie for more familiar heroes to explain the nature of the strange and supernatural too.

He's sure to be the film's most controversial element among series diehards – especially seeing as, in the otherwise exciting and fan-pleasing trailer, he comes off as a rather bland lead. But McQuoid sees even Cole as a perfectly natural extension of the spirit of the series.

"We really felt there was precedent," says McQuoid. "*Mortal Kombat* brings new characters out all the time. So, you know, it's sort of

**ABOVE:** Getting Jax's arms right was a long process – ultimately the team decided on a modern spin on his classic original look.

**RIGHT:** "Josh Lawson, who plays Kano, is an incredibly gifted comic actor," says McQuoid. The character helps bring a dark sense of humour to the film.



almost surprising to me that people are asking [why we added him]. It's like well, have you played the game? There are always lots of new characters! It's not like it's just the classic set that's stayed there the whole time. If it was only the original roster forever, if they hadn't evolved and added 80 odd characters, I'm not sure we would have ever put a new character in. But it just seemed normal for the series."

And, of course, Cole helps to serve as an audience surrogate for those less in the know about the series' lore. "It's trying to expand the *Mortal Kombat* fanbase really, and so this is a way to sort of educate people a bit as he gets brought into this story as well," says McQuoid, who goes on to

liken Cole to being the "player one" of the film. Though he's keen to add he doesn't mean that in a literal or meta sense. ("It's not like, what were those films recently with Jack Black and The Rock?" "Oh, er, Jumanji?" I reply. "Yeah, we didn't do that.")

I'm left cautiously optimistic for the final product. It's impossible not to have misgivings about a project like this – we've been burned too many times before – but I found it oddly refreshing to discover how thoughtful McQuoid is about one of gaming's most endearingly ludicrous series. It gives me hope that this film will, at the very least, have its bloody heart in the right place. But either way, stay tuned – we'll have our full review in an upcoming issue. ■

## VITAL STATISTICS

### The Mortal Kombat trailer in numbers

|                  |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| Arms exploded    | 1 | 2 |   |   |   |  |
| Ninjas murdered  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Dragons summoned | 1 |   |   |   |   |  |
| Fireballs thrown | 1 | 2 |   |   |   |  |
| 'Get Over Here'  | 1 |   |   |   |   |  |
| Fatalities       | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |  |



*Another Eden: The Cat Beyond Time and Space*



# STEP BACK IN TIME WITH ANOTHER EDEN THE CAT BEYOND TIME AND SPACE

A fresh take on classic JRPGs by industry veterans

**Y**ou'd be forgiven for thinking you've been transported back in time to the heyday of old-school JRPGs as you lose yourself in the world of *Another Eden*. The enthralling story, characters, and battle system pay homage to classics such as *Chrono Trigger* and *Xenogears* — but presented with a contemporary polish.

From master storyteller Masato Kato (*Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VII*), this epic story unfolds across the Antiquity, Present, and Future. You'll find yourself thrown headlong into adventure as Aldo, a boy from a small village hurled 800 years into the future by the villainous Beast King. You must set off on a journey, gather allies, and travel across time and space to find Aldo's sister, Feinne, and save her — as well as the world — from destruction.

Another Eden boasts a vast and vibrant world, with a map that spans multiple eras and continents. Each area is brought to life with a rich art style,

thanks to the direction by prominent illustrator Takahito Exa (Bincho-tan).

And just as you'd expect, this JRPG

employs a strategic turn-based battle system, reminiscent of early JRPGs such as *Xenogears* and classic *Final Fantasy* games, so long-time fans of the genre will feel right at home. Employ devastating chants, special skills, and combo attacks between party members, with over 100 playable characters.

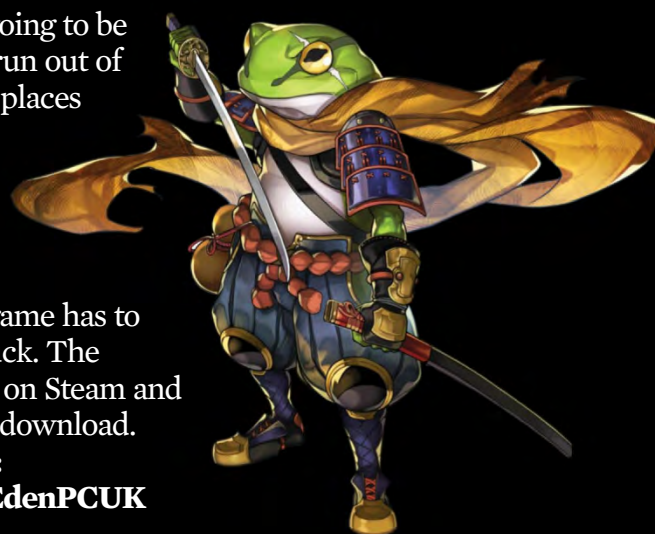
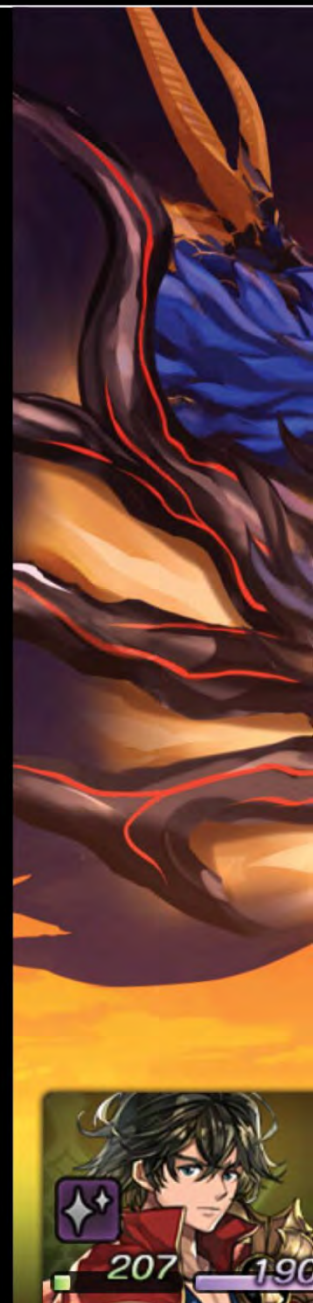
You get to play at your own pace and immerse yourself fully in the world. There are no limited time events, social integrations, or PvP, so you can take your time without the pressure of 'staying ahead'. There's plenty to keep you busy though — aside from the endless content associated with the main story, crossover content from both *Persona 5 Royal* and the *Tales of* series are permanent and allow you to add Joker, Morgana, Cress, Yuri, and more to the party for free by playing through the associated content.

And as with any self-respecting JRPG, there are over 60 songs on the live orchestrated soundtrack — and the main theme song comes courtesy of Yasunori Mitsuda, the composer behind the music from *Chrono Trigger*, *Chrono Cross*, and *Xenogears*.

Another Eden was originally launched on mobile — 2017 in Japan, and 2019 in the US, EU and globally — this means that there are hundreds of hours of story content to explore. So between working your way through spin-off episodes, side quests, character quests, collaboration stories, and dungeon and battle content, you're going to be hard-pushed to run out of things to do and places to explore.

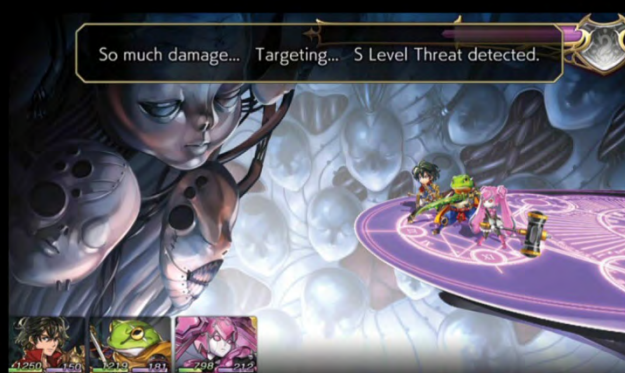
If you're keen to jump in and see for yourself everything this game has to offer, you're in luck. The game is out now on Steam and PC and ready to download.

**Play free today:**  
[bit.ly/AnotherEdenPCUK](https://bit.ly/AnotherEdenPCUK)





Another Eden: The Cat Beyond Time and Space





# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

### DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

### EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

### THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.

**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

**Examples** *Prey, NieR: Automata*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

**Examples** *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

**Examples** *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

**Examples** *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

**97%-100%** Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more  
[www.bit.ly/pcgreviews](http://www.bit.ly/pcgreviews)



## Glitch switch

Fate's a funny thing, sometimes. This month my PC decided to have a bit of a breakdown, leaving me unable to play demanding games. With new hardware still in short supply, it's not a fun time to be trying to get replacement parts. But at the same time, the incident has forcibly detached me from my pile of shame, and forced me to play only the month's smaller, lower-spec games – which have turned out to be its best. From the retro-inspired yet thoroughly modern genius of *Loop Hero* to the wonderfully punchy roguelike action of *Curse of the Dead Gods*, I've been having an oddly fulfilling holiday from the world of AAA releases. If I hadn't had these technical problems, perhaps I wouldn't have found the time or space for some of 2021's best releases. That said, I'm still pretty keen to get it working again before *Deathloop* comes out...

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LET US KNOW  
WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via [letters@pcgamer.com](mailto:letters@pcgamer.com) with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





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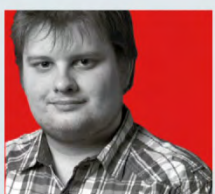
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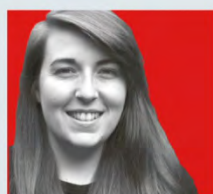
## This month's villainous reviewers...



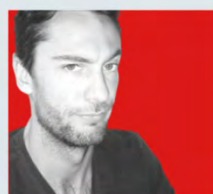
**RICK LANE**  
Specialist in  
Maniacal laughter  
**Currently playing**  
*Evil Genius 2*  
**This month**  
Threatened to blow up  
the Moon if we didn't  
let him review *Evil*  
*Genius 2*.



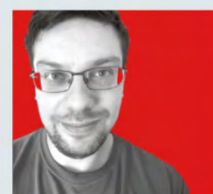
**EVAN LAHTI**  
Specialist in  
Letting games play  
themselves  
**Currently playing**  
*Loop Hero*  
**This month**  
Discovered that  
vampires can be good  
for your health.



**RACHEL WATTS**  
Specialist in  
Tron logic  
**Currently playing**  
*Narita Boy*  
**This month**  
Got sucked into a  
games console – the  
worst fear of any PC  
gamer.



**ROBERT ZAK**  
Specialist in  
Spirit tracks  
**Currently playing**  
*HellSign*  
**This month**  
Learned how to hunt  
ghosts. It's satisfying,  
but there's not much  
meat on them.



**LUKE KEMP**  
Specialist in  
Divine retribution  
**Currently playing**  
*Curse of the*  
*Dead Gods*  
**This month**  
Was cursed to write  
game reviews for a  
dead medium.



**TOM SYKES**  
Specialist in  
Breakout hits  
**Currently playing**  
*Locust, U.S.A.*  
**This month**  
Learned to love  
hitting a ball with a  
paddle like never  
before.



**MATT ELLIOTT**  
Specialist in  
Spacing out  
**Currently playing**  
*XCOM 2*  
**This month**  
Found a game that  
doesn't cater well to  
his 'never tell me the  
odds' policy.



# DESPICABLE GLEE

**EVIL GENIUS 2: WORLD DOMINATION** simulates both the devious delights and fiendish frustrations of being a frothing megalomaniac. *By Rick Lane*

**T**hanks to *Evil Genius 2*, I now understand why so many criminal masterminds are bald. It's because they've torn all their hair out through sheer frustration. When a James Bond knockoff rocks up to your secret lair and murders a bunch of henchmen with an exploding cufflink or whatever, that's all well and good for the henchmen, who are now on a permanent lunch hour, but nobody considers the administrative headache it causes for the boss.

Now you've got to train new henchmen to replace the old ones, which means dipping into your pool of workers and sending them to the equivalent of thug university. This in turn means hiring *more* workers, which costs money you don't have because you spent it all on replacing the traps that double-not-seven *also* broke. This means spinning more moneymaking schemes, which cost yet more henchmen to set in motion, thus starting the *whole* cycle over again.

Being a master villain is one big headache for your big bald braincase, and it's this villainous bureaucracy that *Evil Genius 2* replicates. Mostly for the better, but sometimes for the worse. When all's said and done, it's a fine management title that balances brilliantly presented base-building with some genuinely challenging plate-spinning. But thank goodness it features a mechanic that lets you randomly shoot your minions, because otherwise at times I might

have ripped my own skull out and thrown it at the screen.

**BASE DROP**

Placing you in the role of one of several cackling megalomaniacs, *Evil Genius 2* sees you constructing a secret lair on a volcanic island out in the Pacific, then using that lair to sow chaos through the world. You'll construct rooms to service both your minions' needs and your dastardly

desires, recruit various types of underling to help realise your nefarious plans, lay traps and obstacles to bamboozle enemy agents, and ultimately construct a terrifying doomsday device to make the world bend at the knee.

This starts with a base-building bonanza. Unlike, *Dungeon Keeper* or *Two Point Hospital*, which mete out the different rooms you can build across multiple levels within the game, *Evil Genius 2* more or less lets you build all of its rooms at once.

**Recruit various types of underling to help realise your plans**

**NEED TO KNOW**

- WHAT IS IT?**  
Real-time strategy with evil on its mind
- EXPECT TO PAY**  
£35
- DEVELOPER**  
Rebellion
- PUBLISHER**  
In-house
- REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X, Radeon 5700XT, 15GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER**  
No
- LINK**  
[evilgeniusgame.com](http://evilgeniusgame.com)

From barracks for your minions through cafeterias and training areas, all the way up to your genius' gold-plated inner sanctum, you'll have the basic layout of your base established within the first five hours.

This part of *Evil Genius 2* is pure entertainment, not least because the base-building both looks and feels superb. Like *Two Point Hospital*, *Evil Genius 2* boasts a vibrant, cartoon style, and although it's less Aardman it still bears some resemblance to the original and considerably craggier *Evil Genius*. Your minions mine out rooms with bulky, underslung laser cannons, then use those same cannons to put objects and furniture into rooms, which fall into place with a mighty *whomp*.

But the real treat here is the animation, which is both meticulous in its detail and delightfully comic. I love the way guards lumber through corridors, clad in red spandex like an evil Mr Incredible, a stark contrast to the superior, stiff-backed stroll of your scientists. But the highlight of Rebellion's animation work is found in your interrogation room, where your minions torture captured agents by tickling their feet or dropping sticks of fake dynamite into their laps.

It's a fantastic game to watch in motion, which is just as well because after this feast of construction comes something of a fallow patch. Once you've built your inner sanctum, *Evil Genius 2* falls into a holding pattern as your scientists research new traps, upgrades, and room objects, while you begin to grapple with your ultimate goal of world domination.

**CRIME PAYS**

The emphasis switches to two activities: expanding your criminal network across the globe and defending your base from enemy agents. The former involves dispatching groups of minions to establish relay stations in different areas around the world. Each of these provides a small amount of residual income, while also unlocking



**CHOOSE YOUR GENIUS**

*Which megalomaniac are you?*



**MAXIMILIAN**

- + Faster minions
- + Starts with more guys
- + Good at acquiring gold
- Short



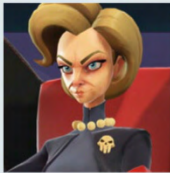
**RED IVAN**

- + Extra guards
- + Rocket launcher
- + Brian Blessed
- Batshit insane



**ZALIKA**

- + Scientific genius
- + Faster research
- + Instant repairs
- Terrible fashion sense

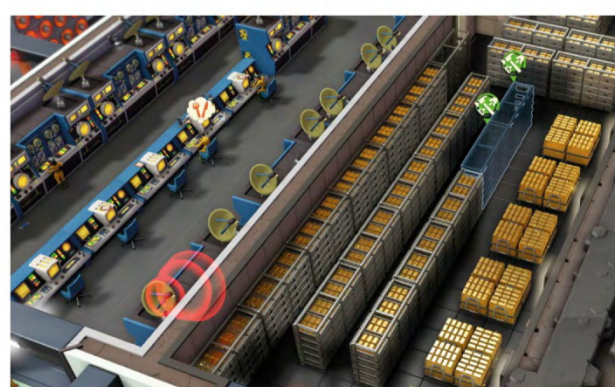
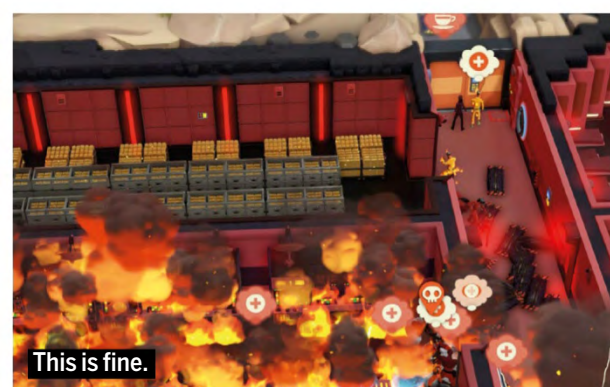
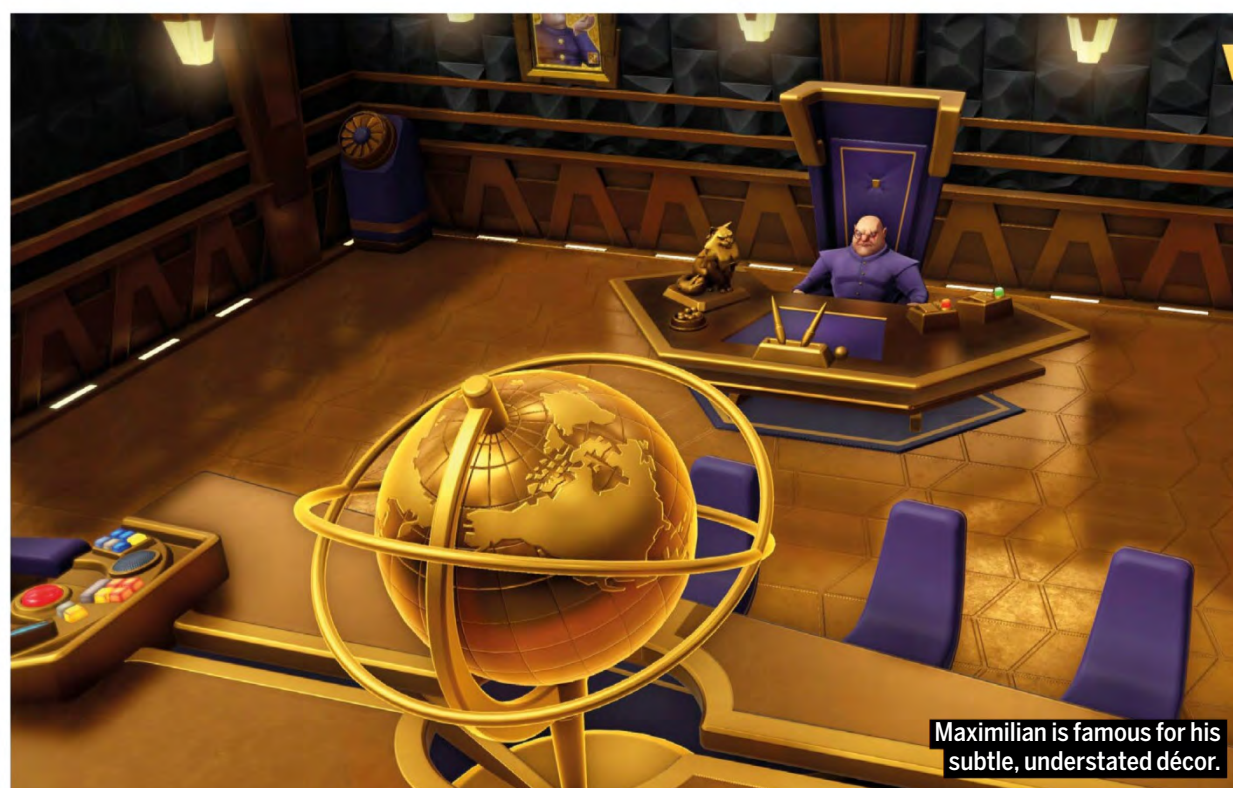


**EMMA**

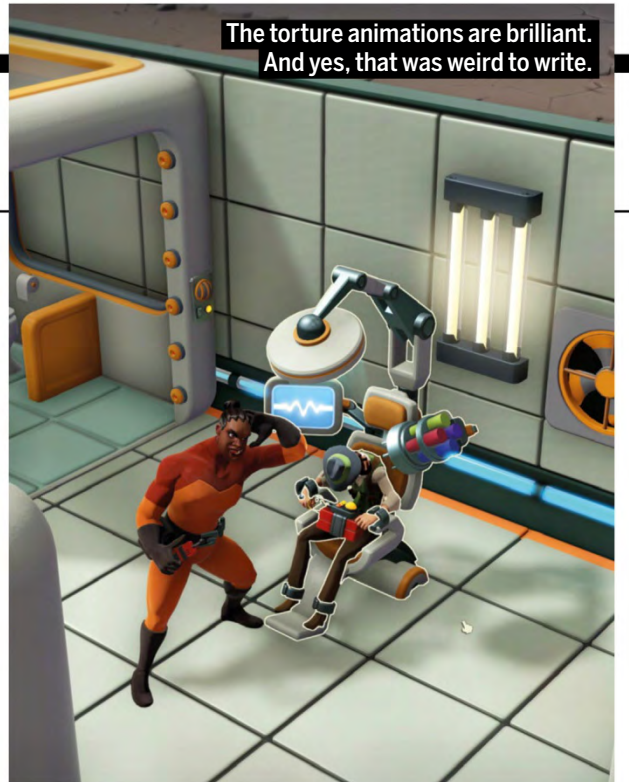
- + Ex Spymaster
- + Efficient covert ops
- + Spider chair
- Probably voted 'leave'



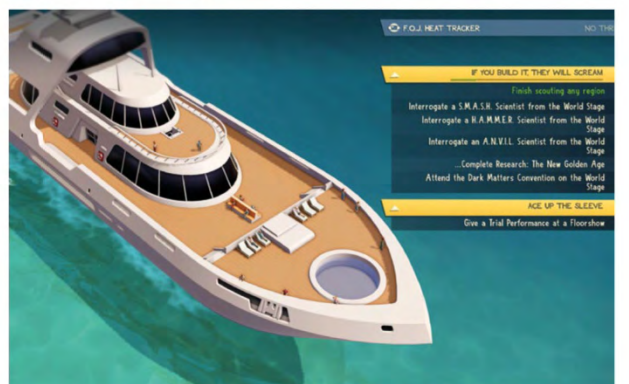
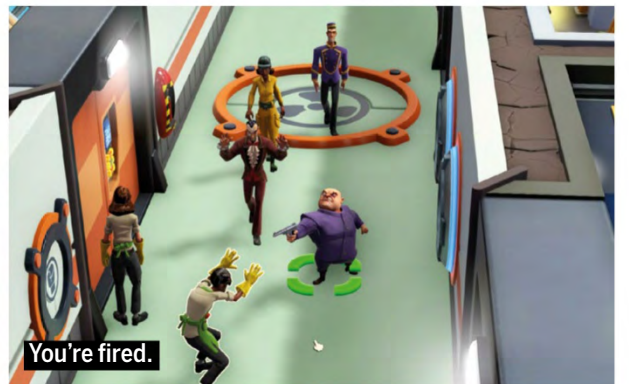
The animations are flawless.  
Just exceptional work.







If a region gets too much heat, it locks down, cancelling ongoing missions and triggering a wave of agents.





» schemes, which will pull in larger chunks of income.

Schemes bring in much-needed cash, but minions dispatched on them don't come back, and they also generate heat. This ultimately leads to the various world governments dispatching agents to investigate and sabotage your lair. Initially, these are incompetent private detectives, but over time, the agents become more numerous and more capable, including super agents, who can waltz through your security infuriatingly easily.

Unwelcome snoops can be dealt with in various ways. In proud *Evil Genius* tradition, you have a range of eclectic traps to deploy, ranging from freeze rays and giant fans to searing laser grids and shark-infested plunge-pools. Should these fail, you can set the base to high alert, whereupon your minions will descend upon enemy agents and clobber them into submission.

My favourite way to deal with agents, however, is to distract them with the cover operation, a glittering casino front complete with cocktail bars, baccarat tables, stage shows, and much more. Watching a spy get fleeced at one of your roulette tables and head home even more empty-handed than when he arrived is incredibly satisfying.

All of this is enjoyable to grapple with, but there's inescapably a somewhat empty feeling to *Evil Genius 2*'s middle game. Part of the problem is that the missions you must

complete to progress are extremely long-winded. Each has four or five sub-objectives to complete, some of which involve completing multiple side-stories that themselves have four or five sub-objectives to complete.

These long and complex chains of objectives make it easy for the simulation to creep in and obstruct your progress. Alongside money, there are a bunch of different resources you need to manage like broadcast strength needed for expanding and upgrading your criminal network, and intel, required for starting higher-level missions. Meanwhile, if a base station in a region hits max heat level, that region locks down. If a mission is in progress when lockdown hits, it's cancelled and you have to restart.

## MEET YOUR MINIONS

*Here are the first underlings you'll encounter*

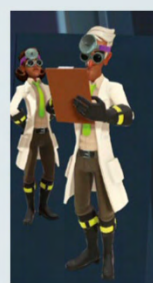
### WORKER

Your common or garden lackey. Will dig new rooms, place new equipment, and monitor systems.



### SCIENTISTS

Spend most of their time in the lab researching new tech. But they can also be used to gather intel.



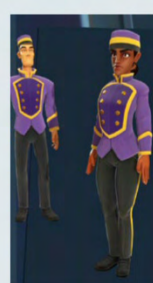
### GUARD

The first of several "muscle" minions, guards will man posts and attempt to stop agents.



### VALET

Valets work in your cover op, looking after tourists and distracting agents from the lair's true purpose.



What doesn't help is that the missions are not always that engaging. They have cool concepts, like kidnapping rival crime bosses or stealing the Declaration of Independence, but most of the action happens off-screen. Meanwhile, the cutscenes that bookend objectives are let down by some iffy voice performances. The geniuses are all superbly acted, as you'd expect when

Rebellion has sourced voice talent such as Brian Blessed, but the minions and subordinates are stilted and unconvincing, which has the effect of your geniuses basically shouting at mannequins.

The result was a good few hours where I spent most of my time waiting. Waiting for a new technology to unlock. Waiting for my helicopter to transport minions to a mission site. Waiting to accrue enough money to dig a new room through 'hard rock', which is disproportionately more expensive to mine through than regular rock. Everything takes too long to resolve, and there's not enough going on to occupy your time during these periods. There is a fast-forward function, of course, but using this is risky, as you might miss an agent sneaking into your base, or a region with a mission ongoing slipping into lockdown.

This problem never quite goes away, but it does become

less acute once you start working on your doomsday device. At this point, you've unlocked enough new items and accrued enough funds that your base needs considerable expansion. Enemy agents become more numerous and more challenging, including one who waltzed through my security and blew up half of my communications network before I knew he was there. Your minions become more diversified, and you unlock more lucrative missions on the world map, making it easier to manage heat levels and providing more space to tinker with your base while other stuff's going on.

## NECESSARY EVIL

When *Evil Genius 2* is on form, it's one of the best management games out there. Not only is it imaginative and fun, it's also genuinely challenging. Trying to juggle your finances while monitoring the world to negate heat lockdowns, while also fighting literal fires as an agent stalks through your corridors, disguised so he's invisible to everyone but you, is super engaging. There are also some other cool features that I haven't yet mentioned, like how you can recruit rival crime bosses to become your henchmen, but only after thoroughly putting them in their place first. You can also brainwash enemy agents and turn them into minions, while minions that are dissatisfied with their lot may attempt to desert your lair leaving you minionless.

But there's no getting away from the fact that the game's feedback loops are too stretched out. It feels like it could offer a tight 20-hour game, more than enough considering there are four different geniuses to play as. But it's stretched to 40 hours by overlong missions and a whole lot of waiting for stuff to happen.

Despite taking a roundabout route to get there, though, in the end I think *Evil Genius 2* successfully replicates the cat-stroking, moustache-twirling, mad-cackling fun of being a calculating super-villain. On the scale of criminal masterminds, I'd rate it a Dr Evil. It's funny and it's got the right stuff, but it's not quite the full Blofeld. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

A superbly stylish and challenging management game, *Evil Genius 2* is let down only by its tendency to bloviate.

75





# RINGER

Charming micro RPG **LOOP HERO** is one of this year's first true gems. *By Evan Lahti*

**F**rom the moment its 16-colour title screen fades in alongside dramatic chiptunes, *Loop Hero* feels like some forgotten, VGA-era fantasy RPG, a game that contains the mystery and difficulty of 1991, gently modernised to 2021. Behind that charming intro screen isn't empty, indulgent nostalgia, but a novel gameplay format that's strangely engrossing, considering much of your time playing *Loop Hero* is hands-off. I want more games like this.

The setup is dead-simple: you send one of three heroes (warrior, rogue, or necromancer) on repeated expeditions to an empty road. As your little hero auto-walks around this stone path, you populate the blank world around it by playing cards like graveyards, battlefields, villages, or mountains one by one. These pieces in turn alter hero or enemy stats like attack speed and HP, and spawn corresponding enemies that you fight automatically as you pass through them.

Each run essentially becomes a small experiment, another crack at piecing together a level that's tough enough to give you good XP, resources and gear but not so brutal that it kills you outright. What happens if I play a bunch of spider cocoons and sand dunes, which lower all creatures' HP? What will river cards do if I intersect them with the road itself? Can my warrior survive two adjacent tiles filled with giant sandworms?

*Loop Hero* is about tending this little gauntlet. It's unexpectedly fun to have zero control over combat and worry mostly about arranging these little tiles. My favourite design element within *Loop Hero*'s build-your-own-dungeon concept are the hidden effects that trigger when you play certain cards. Drop nine mountain cards in a 3x3 grid and they transform into a massive Everest-like peak, granting a mega boost to max HP. But, surprise: harpies now live in the mountain you built, a challenging enemy type that will fly down to a random part of your board every few

days. And if you play a tenth mountain or rock card, a goblin encampment will randomly spawn on the road, churning out some nasty, fast-attacking enemies.

These surprises are arbitrary and delightful. It's refreshing to play a game that doesn't even hint at how to unlock some of its powerful effects. But by the time I was 25 hours in, once I'd discovered almost everything, I did want

more of these surprise interactions.

**It's  
unexpectedly  
fun to have  
zero control  
over combat**

## LOOT HERO

The other side of *Loop Hero*'s interactivity is swapping out pieces of gear, an almost constant task of changing out helmets, shields, and enchanted weapons. As you kill monsters, new gear of differing rarity pops into your inventory for

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A hands-off retro roguelike laden with mystery

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£12.50

**DEVELOPER**  
Four Quarters

**PUBLISHER**  
Devolver

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i7-4770K,  
Nvidia GeForce 3080,  
16 GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
loophero.com

consideration. It's fun and effective in practice, a hyper-distillation of action RPGs like *Diablo*: would you rather have 25% more attack speed or 33% evasion?

One knock against all the loot management is that, like its mysterious card effects, *Loop Hero* doesn't explain the relative value of every combat stat. Likewise, some enemy abilities aren't easy to understand, even though the game contains tooltips. The in-game encyclopaedia does mitigate some of this confusion, but has to unlocked via hard-won resources.

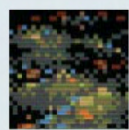
Even without control over your character, there are wonderful little pockets of depth in combat. When you're playing the necromancer, fights with multiple enemies turn into pleasant battles of attrition, where your hero struggles to summon enough skeletons to soak damage. The dual-wielding rogue, meanwhile, only earns loot once he reaches the campfire tile, so you're often holding your breath until you reach the finish line, praying you make it alive to heal up and gear up.

*Loop Hero* is the concentrated experience of watching numbers get bigger in a videogame, but it's a grimly enchanting one. Its biggest point of success is that it makes a home in this middle zone between watching, planning, and acting. Supporting each and every moment is some excellent music and sound design – scraping slashes, a giant mosquito's buzz, the clattering sound of a skeleton reanimating.

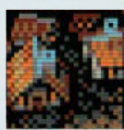
This is the sort of smart, focused resurrection of old games I want more of, something that feels retro and new with every expedition step. I managed to put more than 40 hours into this quote-unquote small game. ■

## SLEIGHT OF HAND

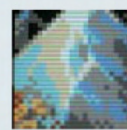
*Combo certain cards together to create secret interactions*



**BLOOMING MEADOW**  
Place a Meadow adjacent to any other tile to boost its healing power. But it doesn't work if it's diagonally adjacent, so choose your placements carefully.



**COUNT'S LAND**  
Place a Vampire Mansion adjacent to a Village to turn it into a Ransacked Village full of ghouls. After three more loops, it'll turn into a Count's Land that heals more and gives better quests.



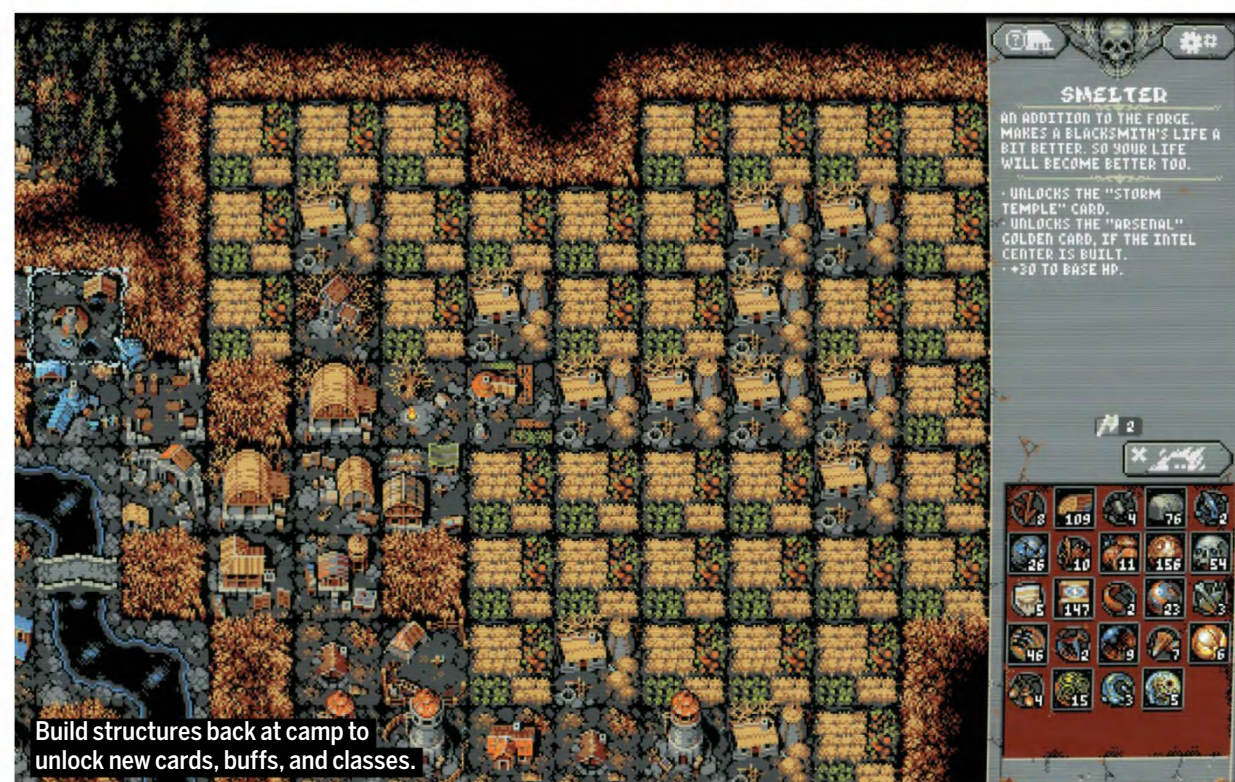
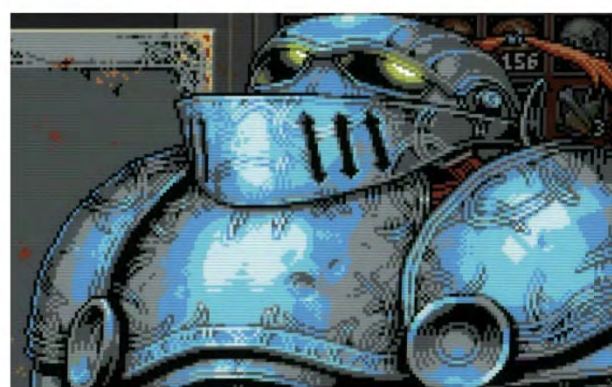
**MOUNTAIN PEAK**  
Place nine Rocks or Mountains together in a grid, and they'll form a Mountain Peak that boosts your health even more – but also spawns dangerous harpies across the map.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Loop Hero* has the spirit of early '90s fantasy games, cleverly revived in an original and digestible form.

**83**







# CONSOLE WARS

**NARITA BOY** is a vibrant retro-futuristic adventure about cyber heroes and digital legends. *By Rachel Watts*

It's nothing short of blasphemy to mention a gaming console inside a magazine that is strictly about PC gaming and hopefully, the print between your fingers hasn't been set ablaze at the forbidden word alone. But, I think the PC gaming gods will forgive me writing about *Narita Boy*, a platforming action adventure that takes place inside a gaming console, whose circuits, wires, and lines of code have all been transformed into an intricate digital empire.

Playing as the eponymous hero Narita Boy, you have been summoned to save the Digital Kingdom from a crisis. Travelling through each of the kingdom's three regions, you must defeat the evil servants of HIM, a dark program that wishes to see the Digital Kingdom fall. It's the usual 'hero saving the world' narrative, but with the twist of it being inside a retro gaming console from the '80s.

I think the idea for *Narita Boy* is brilliant. Every piece of a gaming console has been assigned a role within this fantasy universe, and with enough lore to rival *Game of Thrones*. It has a certain mysticism too, like how the high-priestess of the entire kingdom is a supervisor program named Motherboard, other sentient programs called techno-fathers worship complex algorithms, floppy disks act as keys to the holiest of temples, and lines of code are treated as ancient scripture. The game brings technology and

mysticism together to create a truly engaging setting.

The spirituality of the world isn't just meaningless symbols and signs. Throughout the Digital Kingdom you get to dip into the memories of the person who built this place, The Creator, the god in this digital realm – who happens to be a balding, pit-stain of a dude in the real world. As you delve into his memories, you begin to understand how his life has informed the game,

from his early childhood in Japan living with his religious mother and the family struggles he faced with his father. These moments are quietly reflective and act as a great counterbalance to all the fun '80s macho power-fantasy present throughout the rest of the game.

### HACK IT

*Narita Boy* is a combat-heavy platformer, but thankfully your pixel hero is decked out with some smooth moves. Slicing and dicing through

### NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**  
An '80s inspired platformer with a digital-fantasy twist
- EXPECT TO PAY**  
TBA
- DEVELOPER**  
Studio Koba
- PUBLISHER**  
Team17
- REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 8GB RAM, AMD Raedon RX 5700 XT
- MULTIPLAYER**  
No
- LINK**  
[naritaboy-game.com](http://naritaboy-game.com)

enemies feels punchy, and there are plenty of ways to take out a foe without spamming the attack button. Enemy attacks are clearly choreographed, letting you breeze past most encounters, and boss battles feel more about showing off the idea behind the creation rather than being actually challenging. In one climactic fight I had to dodge a giant mecha-carp in a bathhouse as I surfed on a huge floppy disk. Fun!

*Narita Boy's* story is strictly linear, with clearly marked goals to follow as you run around its pixel-perfect backdrop. There's some back and forth between certain areas, but so much of the game is decorated with incredibly striking scenes that it's a pleasure whenever you do have to double-back. But as pretty as they are, I was constantly getting lost in *Narita Boy's* world. Trying to remember all the names of things can get confusing. I kept getting tangled up in the world's lore, not knowing where I could find the Servo-Horse, what the Hackernauts are, how I could get to the Techno-Algorithm Hall, what the Gallery of the Cosmovisions is – it left me dazed.

This coupled with the graphics of the game can cause a real headache. As much as I love the retro-era visuals combined with the look of an old VHS tape, platforms and doors blend easily into the background.

However, these are small hiccups in an overall slick adventure. Plunging your sword into the digital hearts of enemies feels great, and learning about how this kingdom came to be is a wild ride of heartbreak, creepy cults, and flamboyant rock. *Narita Boy* removes the vapidness of '80s nostalgia and couples it with an epic fantasy narrative and an earnest core. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Narita Boy's digital twist on a classic fantasy tale is engrossing. Unfortunately it can get disorientating at times.

73

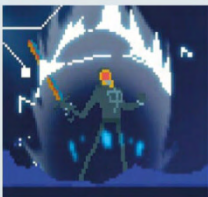
The spirituality of the world isn't just meaningless symbols

## BOY'S GOT MOVES

Here are the best techniques in *Narita Boy's* arsenal



**DODGE**  
Your best friend in any combat-heavy game – gets you out of trouble.



**ENERGETIC CHARGE**  
Literally a lifesaver. Heals one square of your life bar.



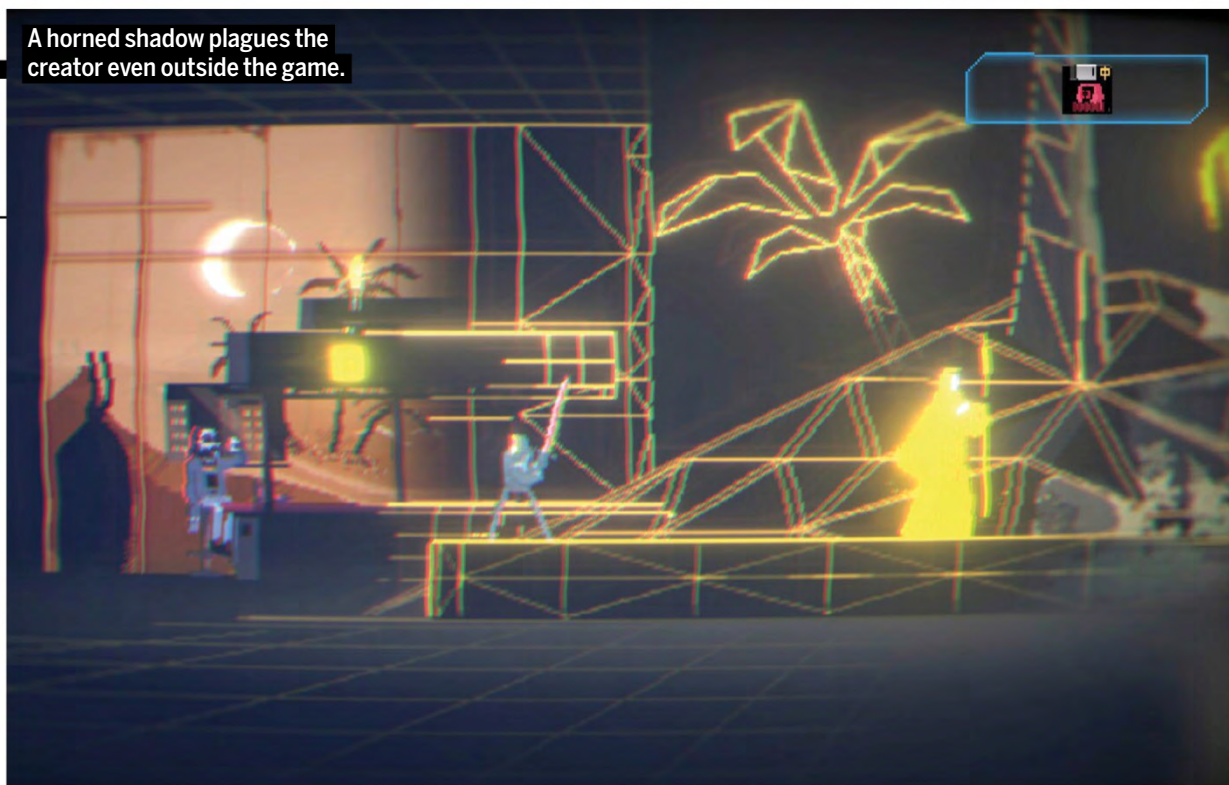
**SHOULDER BASH**  
Knock enemies off balance and rush in for the kill.



**UPPERCUT**  
This swoop lets you reach higher places and slice enemies in half.



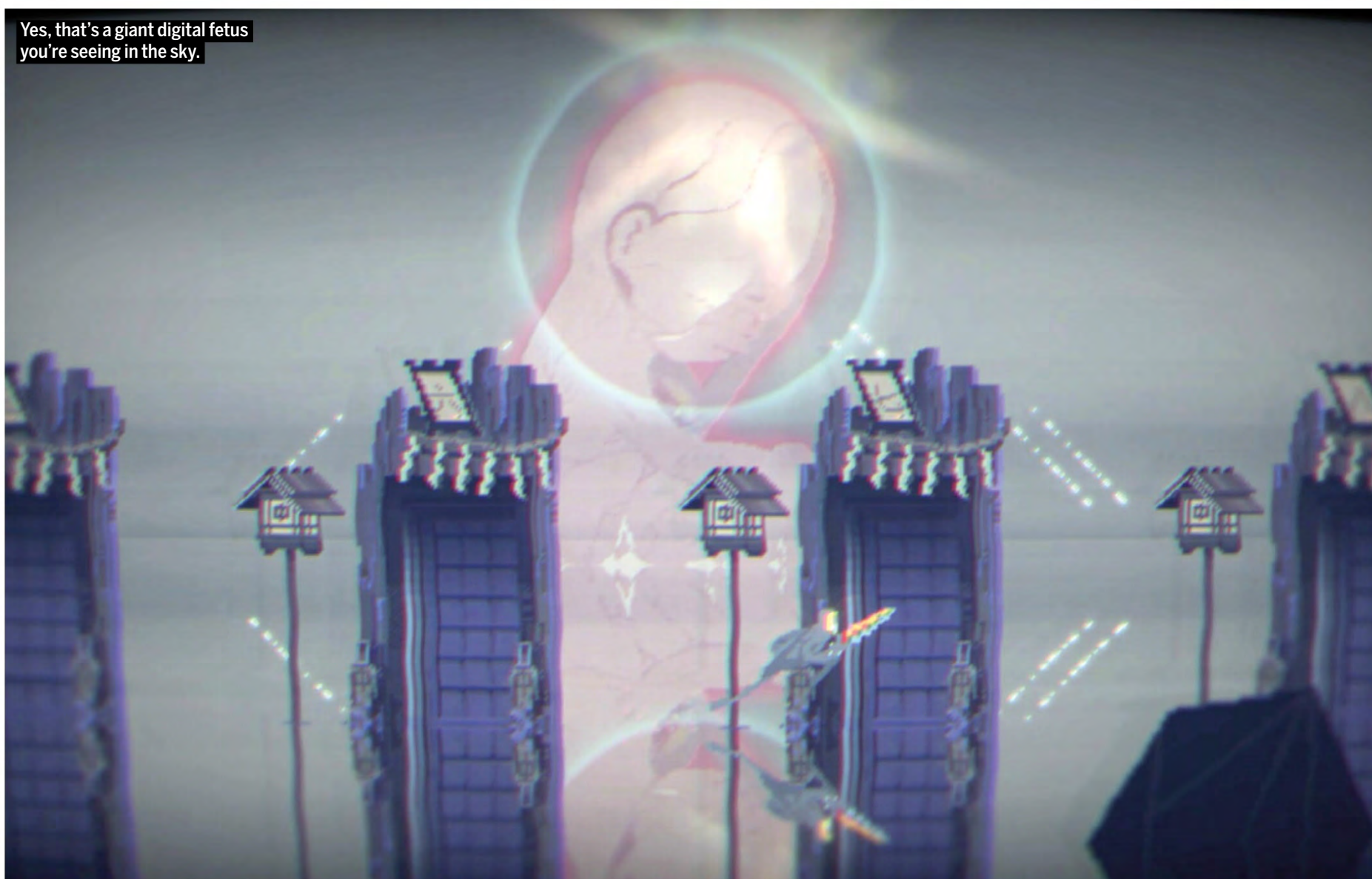
A horned shadow plagues the creator even outside the game.



A giant stone noggin is a gateway to the creator's memories.



Yes, that's a giant digital fetus you're seeing in the sky.



Bombastic battles are balanced with serene scenes.



This is what horses look like in the Digital Kingdom.



# KHAN'T COMPETE

Can **STRONGHOLD: WARLORDS** rebuild the foundations of the series? *By Rob Zak*

**T**he original *Stronghold* holds a special place in my heart. You build a medieval barony, surround it with a labyrinth of impassable walls, and stave off waves of attackers while keeping the serfs living within happy, well-fed, and well-taxed. It had real character too, with a lovely soundtrack, snappy unit soundbites and memorable villains.

*Stronghold: Warlords* feels a million miles away from that game. It's the most sprawling entry series in the yet – largely abandoning the principle of building a feudal gauntlet for waves of enemies in favour of a more traditional RTS setup featuring larger maps and symmetrically placed enemy bases.

The warlords system is the twist here. Beyond your base and the enemy's, there are several smaller estates on the map held by neutral warlords.

Defeat these warlords and they'll join your side, sending you resources on demand, offering mini-forts to shelter your troops, and even launching attacks on your enemies.

It's a decent idea in principle but falters on a couple of levels. Firstly, it means that your main keep doesn't see a ton of action. Most of your time in a skirmish match will be spent scuffling over these warlord forts that you don't have any hand in building except for preset upgrades. You buy these upgrades with diplomacy

points, which you can also use to buy a warlord's loyalty. The system gets very messy in the late game as you and enemies get embroiled in an endless diplomatic tug of war by throwing your points at warlords to win their fleeting loyalty.

## Equipment is varied, ranging from trebuchets to kamikaze oxen

### HOLDING ON

The actual warfare works much better. Siege equipment is varied, ranging from trebuchets to kamikaze oxen to a rudimentary medieval rocket launcher, and watching

a city burn before funnelling your troops into it remains one of gaming's crueller pleasures. Familiar melee, cavalry, and ranged troops are joined by Far Eastern classics like samurai, warrior monks, horse archers, and ninjas. It's a solid roster, making combat tactically richer than earlier games while retaining some of the series' trademark whimsy.

Back on the homefront, you'll need to keep the people happy with food, clothing, tea, and temples if you want to crank up those taxes. You can

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Base-building real-time strategy game set in the Far East

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£27

**DEVELOPER**  
Firefly Studios

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X,  
Radeon 5700XT, 16GB  
RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Online co-op and PvP

**LINK**  
stronghold  
warlords.com

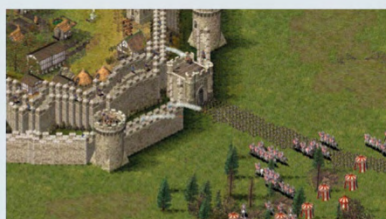
choose whether to be a popular if feared lord through entertainment buildings like theatres on the one hand and public torture instruments on the other. Managing people and economics within your walls was always a strongpoint of the series, and *Warlords* upholds that tradition. It's a joy to see an efficient stronghold in motion, as the little people scurry between buildings, make use of fancy stone roads, and offer little soundbites on the state of things when you click them.

There are five lengthy campaigns set across Vietnam, China, Japan, and Mongolia, each casting you as a real-life historical ruler of the respective region – from galloping around the plains of Mongolia as Genghis Khan to guiding Thuc Phan on his quest to become king of the Au Lac kingdom in the jungles of modern-day Vietnam.

None of these have much in the way of narrative development – no cutscenes, no big personalities, and no mid-mission twists that force you to rethink your strategy. They're a glorified and protracted tutorial for the meat-and-rice of the game: skirmish mode and multiplayer.

*Stronghold: Warlords* still shines during sieges, when piles of enemies collapse beneath swarms of arrows and soldiers fly out of towers toppled by catapult fire. There's enough customisation in the skirmish mode that you can manufacture these gruelling attritional standoffs, but there's not enough substance in the downtime between them. I'm still waiting for the day when this series reels things in and builds on its sturdy siegecraft foundations, instead of diluting them with generic RTS trappings and other systems that don't quite click. ■

## STRONGEST HOLDS *The best three games in the series*



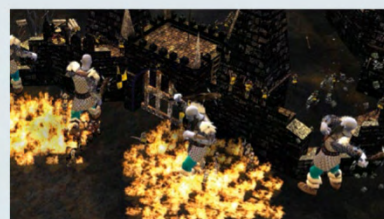
### STRONGHOLD HD

Excellent villains, wonderful voice acting, and a beautiful soundtrack that's as memorable for its ambient medieval tunes as it is for the stentorian battle music.



### STRONGHOLD CRUSADER HD

Ramps up the scale and gives everything a Middle-Eastern makeover. This was still very much a siege game with one side attacking and one defending.



### STRONGHOLD LEGENDS

None of the *Stronghold* games since those mentioned have been great, but at least *Legends* had a bunch of fairy-tale silliness over a so-so strategy game to give it some charm.

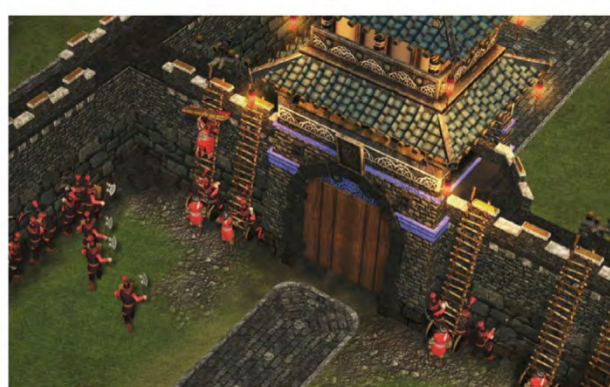
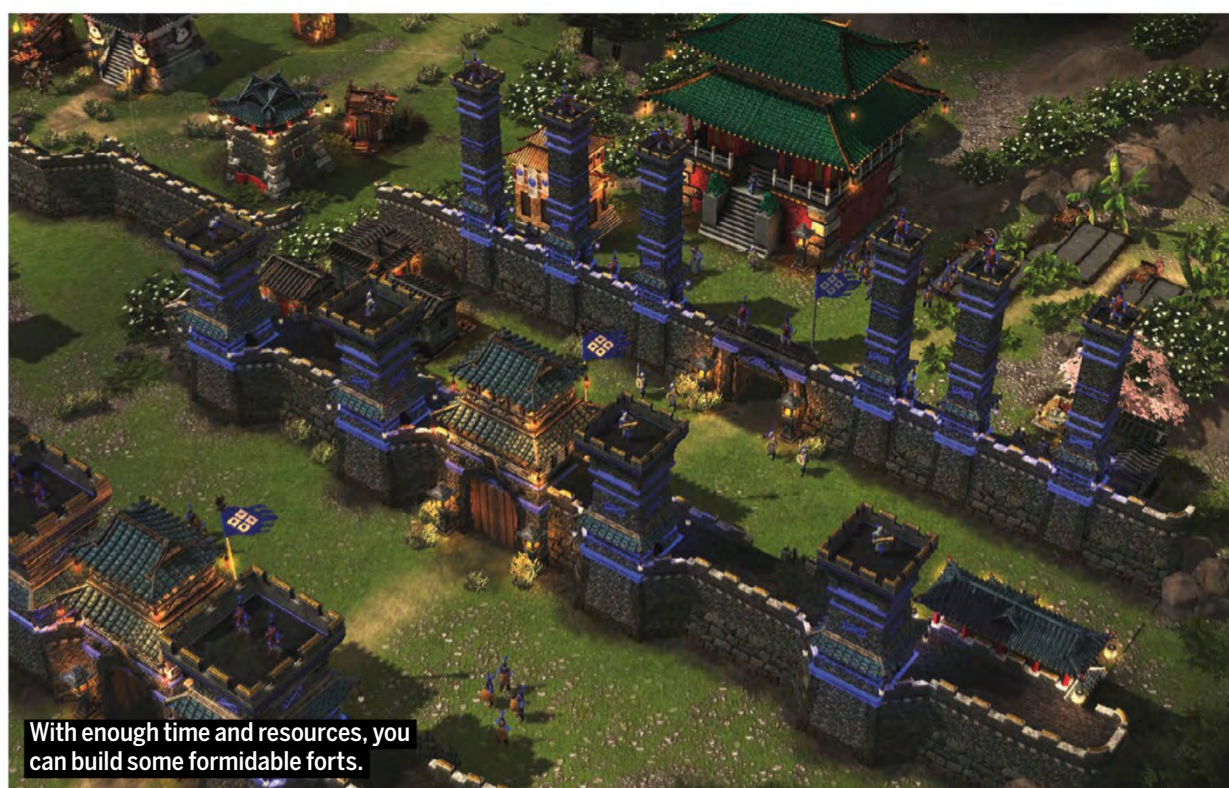
### PC GAMER

### VERDICT

A decent strategy game that lacks the big personality and siegecraft that made the original special.

67







# FLOW RIDER

**MONSTER ENERGY SUPERCROSS – THE OFFICIAL VIDEOGAME 4** raises pulses and health insurance premiums alike. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

**I**f I told you it took me several races in *Monster Energy Supercross – The Official Videogame 4* until I stopped getting lapped by the very easy mode AI, would you laugh? I know, I know. I have considered getting gud. If you'll spare me too much mockery, though, I can explain why I think that's actually a big selling point.

None of my experience with other Milestone games was going to help me here, it seemed. But I enjoyed those pastings, because *Supercross 4* was forcing me to learn a new discipline, distinct from mastering the ebb and flow of *MXGP*'s forgiving outdoor layouts. AMA Supercross is a law unto itself, fought out in tight tracks full of challenging undulations, one after another. It's all about finding the right flow through the obstacles, or paying for it in handfuls of time if you don't stick to it.

The physics underpinning it all aren't perfect, as you'll notice on occasion when you land awkwardly and watch both bike and rider achieve some very odd contortions, but they're coherent enough for you to respect the challenge the game throws at you. To find the right flow through a track, you need to coordinate the rider's position as you hit a jump and as you land after it. You need to scrub and whip in the air to control your height and trajectory by leaning the bike and rider in opposite directions, converting upward momentum to *forward* momentum. And you need to do this on every jump. Otherwise you'll be

lapped by the very easy mode AI and people will laugh at you.

That is, if you're playing in event or championship mode. The AI in the licensed series – 250 East, 250 West and 450 – is more challenging than in career mode, where the real meat of the experience lies. Series veterans

will note a newly extended route to the 450 championship. Don't expect an *NBA 2K*-calibre 'started from the bottom' journey, though: as a rookie you're racing the same 250cc bikes in the same locations as the

higher ups, then unlocking new championships sequentially.

The focus is on developing your rider, ticking off training events (don't get excited, they're truncated races) and spending points in an upgrade tree until you've built the next Jeremy McGrath. *MotoGP* players will feel very familiar with everything but the racing itself in *Supercross 4*, from the rewind function (itself cribbed from Codemasters' *F1* series) to the impressive Unreal Engine lighting and vibrant texture work... and the slightly anachronistic UI and race presentation. How often since, oh, 2002, have your ears been treated to butt rock while you race?

## The revamped track editor allows for all manner of tweaking

### NEED TO KNOW

#### WHAT IS IT?

A licensed motorcycle racing game from a prolific developer of those games.

#### EXPECT TO PAY

£40

#### DEVELOPER

Milestone S.r.l.

#### PUBLISHER

In-house

#### REVIEWED ON

i7 9700K @ 3.6GHz, RTX 2080 TI, 16 GB Ram

#### MULTIPLAYER

Online competitive and co-op

#### LINK

supercross  
thegame.com

### EASY RIDER

And if the world of racing is getting you down; if you're jaded by all the men in snapbacks who look like they listen to Five Finger Death Punch, duking it out in races with more energy drink logos per square inch than a Kyle's recycling bin, there's always the compound.

In this freeform area, *Supercross 4* goes quasi-open world, inviting you to hunt for collectibles and blaze your own trails, finding sick jumps and daring routes over, under and often in bone-shattering collision with environmental features. Elsewhere, the revamped track editor allows for all manner of granular tweaking, whether on existing tracks or new creations. And just as 99% of *Trackmania* creations are nigh-impossible successions of loop-the-loops, surely the point of this is to build something nobody else can ride.

Competitive multiplayer never really works out in Milestone bike sims, and that's not strictly the developer's fault any more than the source material: if you mess up on a motorbike, you fall off. You're not winning the race after that. So it proves in *Supercross 4*'s online mode, whose netcode seems solid enough but often hosts races of ever-dwindling participants for the aforementioned reasons. Still, for the dedicated few, it's there.

It's a feature-rich game, then, for something carrying a relatively niche licence, and Milestone's passion for Supercross just oozes out of every customisation menu and QWOP-like manoeuvre. Its hardcore fans will judge it more on meaningful progress between releases though, and the pace of that progress is about the same as Milestone's *MotoGP* series: slow and steady. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

Not the finest physics simulation ever, but good enough to convey a challenging discipline. Lots of content, too.

70

## YES, I DO WANT SOME SCRUBS *Deal with it, TLC*



**1** Here's how to scrub: first, hit the ramp nice and central.



**2** In the air push the left stick to the right and the right stick to the left.



**3** On descent, switch to the opposite direction on each stick to level out.



**4** Ride away with at least some parts of your skeleton intact.



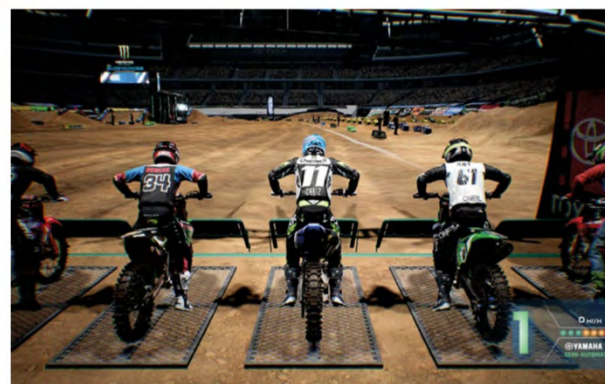
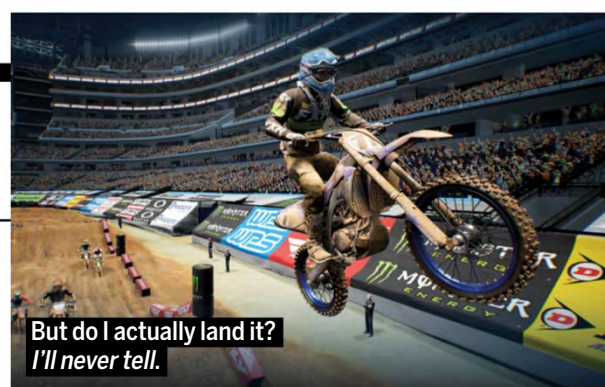
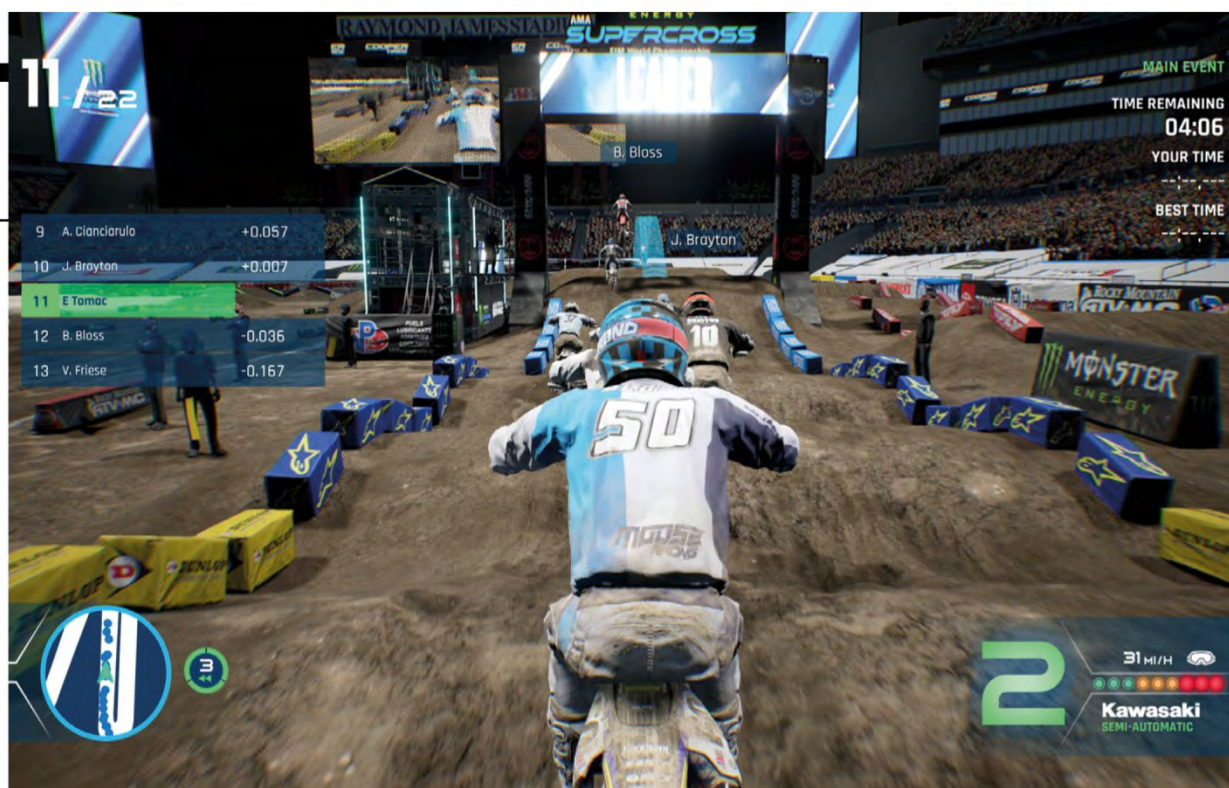
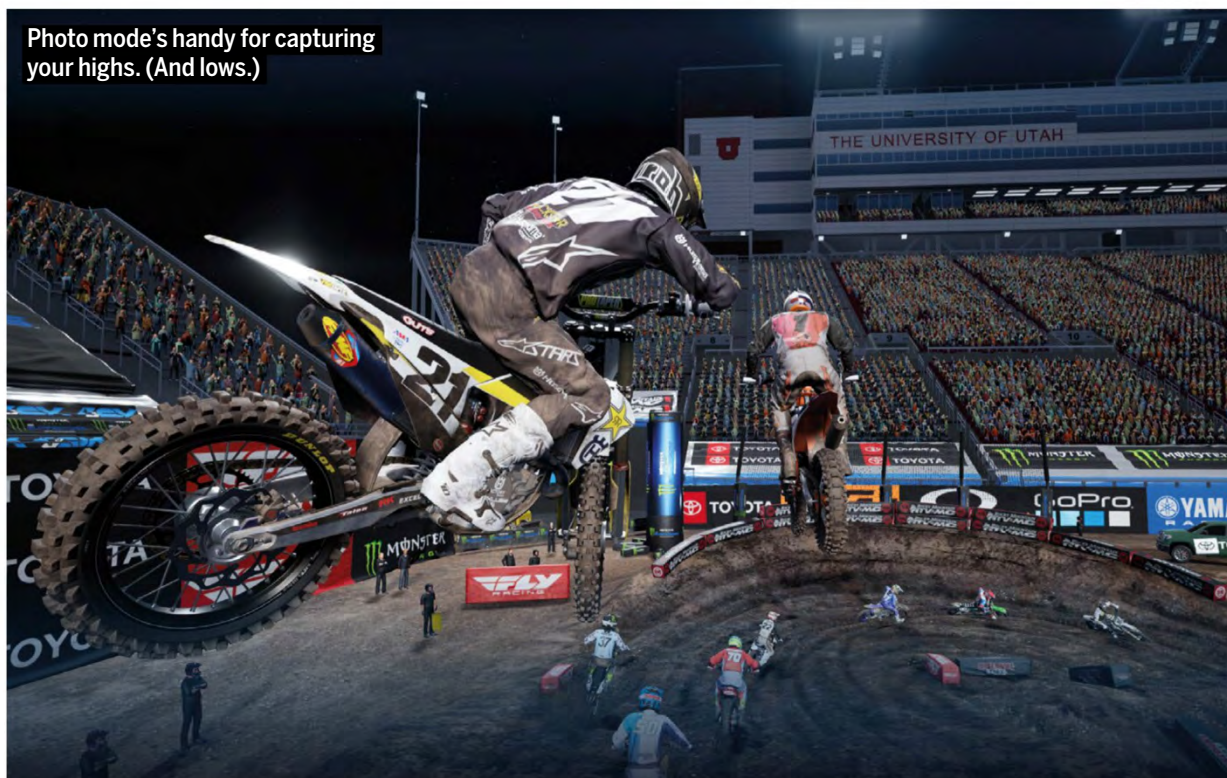


Photo mode's handy for capturing your highs. (And lows.)



Deformable terrain's been a calling card since Milestone's first MXGP.



# CURSE CORRECTION

**CURSE OF THE DEAD GODS** is a sharp and atmospheric roguelike dungeon crawler. *By Luke Kemp*

**W**ho are you? Where are you? Why are you here? These questions and many more are gleefully ignored by Passtech Games. After a brief tutorial it's a case of 'here are some weapons, there's a temple full of monsters and treasure, get on with it'. A bold choice for a roguelike in the post-*Hades* world, perhaps; and one that provides the first sign that comparisons with *Supergiant's* colossus are misleading.

*Curse of the Dead Gods* takes many cues from traditional action adventure games, and benefits from them enormously. The most obvious one is probably the fact that the game is essentially split into levels. The first temple tier contains three 'levels', with three more tiers and a total of seven more levels above that. Each completed level is permanently marked with a satisfying green tick. It's a sign (along with more levels becoming available) of achievement and progress, which is an important part of player feedback that many roguelikes fumble.

Combat is brilliant, another example of more traditional influences. Though familiarly dependent on stamina points, it has a speed and flow that ensures battling the horrors of the temple is always a joy. They didn't just put 'curse' in the title because it looks cool, either. Each time you pass through a door leading to a new area, you gain 20 corruption. Hit 100, and you gain a

random curse, a twist on play that makes things more difficult for you.

You can carry up to five curses at a time, with the fifth and final one slowly sapping your HP until it hits one point. So, you know, you want to avoid that. But! You're regularly tempted to willingly increase your corruption. It's the only way to heal in the rare healing chambers, and anything available at a shrine – weapons, upgrades, buffs – can be had for a corruption

cost if you aren't carrying enough gold. It's a very interesting example of balancing risk and reward, particularly for the longer runs.

## DEAD GOOD

Mind you, it's difficult to lay out the rules of the game, as the developers take such delight in regularly rewriting them. This partly comes through the curses, which might encourage you to embrace the dark rather than shy away from it, or ensure you have at least 300 gold when passing through a door or pay

**They didn't just put 'curse' in the title because it looks cool**

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

Proof that gods are trouble even when they're dead

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£18

**DEVELOPER**  
Passtech Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Focus Home Interactive

**REVIEWED ON**  
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[focus-home.com/en-us/games/curse-of-the-dead-gods](https://focus-home.com/en-us/games/curse-of-the-dead-gods)

the difference in health. The rarer buffs and weapons meanwhile have their own spins on the experience, such as reducing the corruption inflicted when passing through a door, or increasing your damage according to how many relics (buff-bestowing items) you're carrying. After a few hours, you'll start to see the same room layouts creeping in, but it always *feels* fresh.

Randomness plays a strong part in the experience – it's still a roguelike – but you're given the opportunity to slightly nudge things in the direction of your choice. You can spend your persisting currency to expand and (to a small extent) dictate your choice of starting weapons, and even gain tokens to reroll what's on offer at the shrines you encounter during each run. It's a welcome element (illusion?) of control.

The curses, while an important part of what makes the game unique and enjoyable, could do with a bit of balancing. The importance of some depend on your playstyle, but it's much easier to ignore some (chests must be parried on opening or they deal damage) than others (regular enemies spawning poisonous 'vermin' on death). There's one curse in particular, which swaps corruption gain on opening a door for a constant accumulation over time, that can completely kill a run if you gain it at the wrong time. Just before a boss fight, after which you can remove it? Not too bad. Just after a boss, with a curse already on board and several rooms to get through? Best prepare for that HP drain.

That's annoying, but it's also my only big criticism of the game, because just about everything else clicks together wonderfully, for a fantastic roguelike experience. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

A perfect introduction to roguelikes, or a hugely enjoyable and unique adventure for veterans of the genre.

**86**

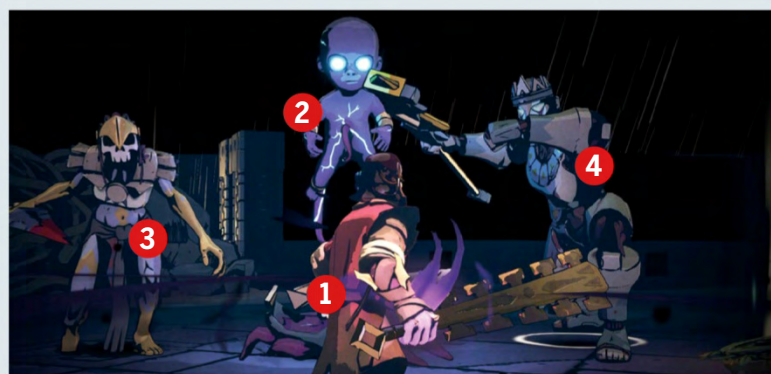
## DEAD TO ME *A few of the cosy characters you'll meet*

### 1 YOU

This is you – an unnamed explorer trapped in the temple. Don't die.

### 2 DREADFUL OFFSPRING

Not a commentary on the music of the American post-punk band.



### 3 BLADE-MASTER

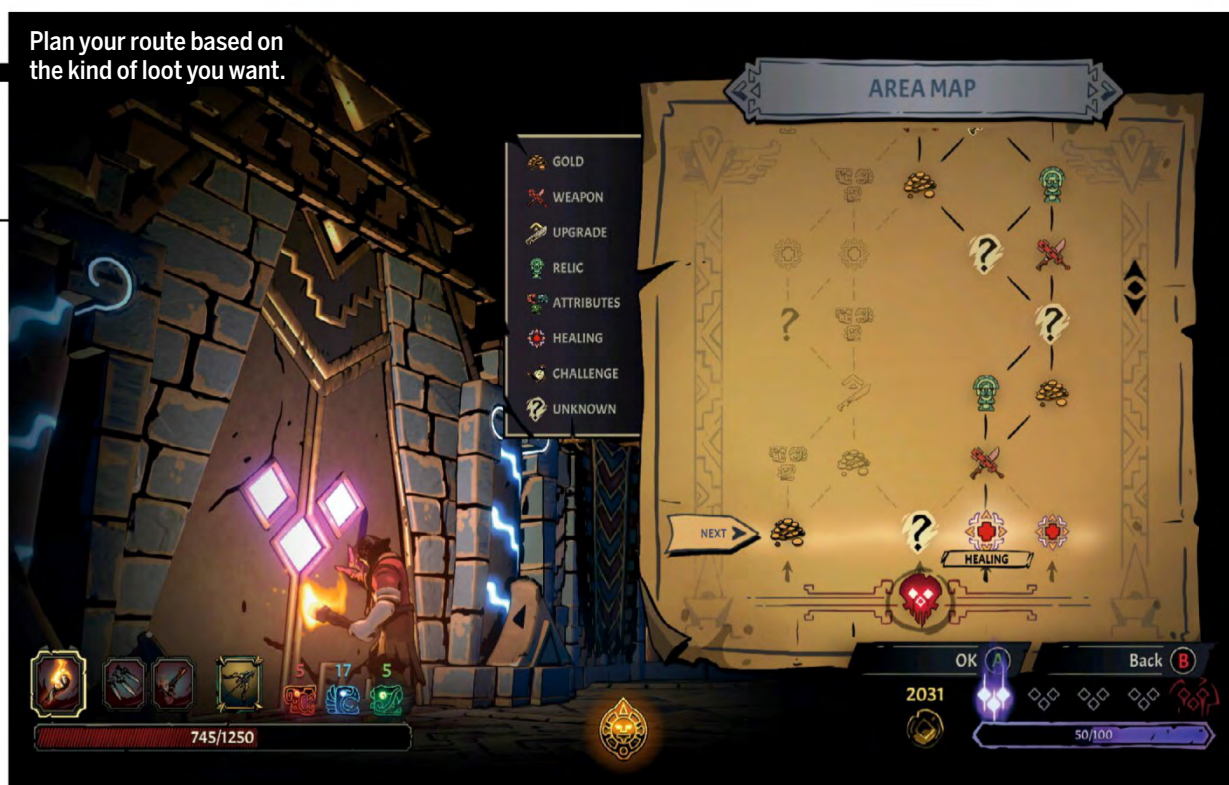
These warriors are really fast, so keep a close eye on them.

### 4 PETRIFIED GUARDIAN

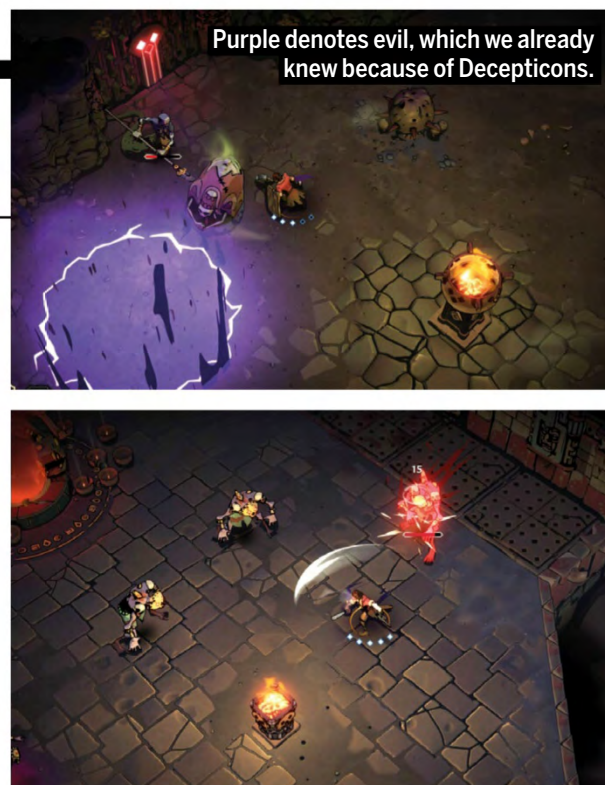
Hits hard with wide swings, but slow enough to avoid if you're careful.



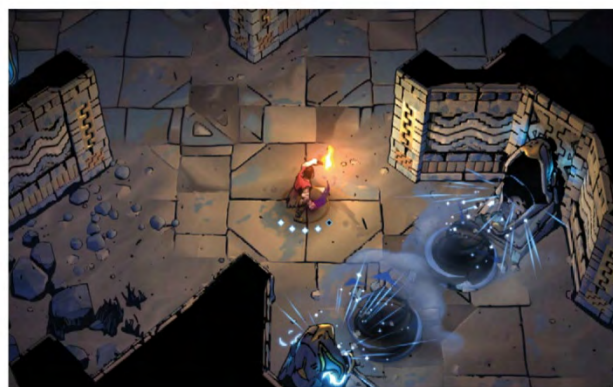
Plan your route based on the kind of loot you want.



Purple denotes evil, which we already knew because of Decepticons.



Heavy weapons drain stamina with alarming speed.



Fire good, statue with red eyes bad.

You're a door-to-door soulsman.





# GOT MILK?

**NEBUCHADNEZZAR** is a capable city-builder, but one that becomes less fun as it goes on. *By Rick Lane*

A city-building throwback that throws players all the way back to the cradle of civilisation, *Nebuchadnezzar* arouses fond memories of games like *Caesar III* and, to a lesser extent, *Age of Empires*. Its classical style both looks and sounds great, while its systems delve considerably deeper than what is apparent on the surface.

Unfortunately, as *Nebuchadnezzar* grows in scope, it becomes increasingly burdened by micromanagement, while a couple of significant design flaws threaten to sink the whole enterprise.

Set in ancient Mesopotamia, *Nebuchadnezzar*'s

campaign tasks you with building some of the world's oldest and greatest cities – Ur, Nineveh, Babylon, etc. Guided by Gilgamesh through the game's four introductory missions, the remaining

nine levels involve constructing thriving metropolises, capping each one off with a great wonder such as Ashurbanipal's Library, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, or your own custom-designed temple complex.

*Nebuchadnezzar* may look dry in screenshots, but it's a different experience in motion. Towns and cities hum with activity. Farmers scatter seeds across their fields, while market vendors wander the streets carrying baskets filled with bread and balancing water jugs on their heads. As your city expands, its buildings evolve and grow, with hordes of new settlers flooding the streets in a scramble to inhabit your new abodes.

Successful city management involves mastering logistics and production chains, as well as catering

to the ever-increasing demands of your populace. There are three different classes of citizen, each of which lives in a different building type that also has multiple stages of evolution. Regular workers will begrudgingly reside in a half-finished

hovel. But supplying these houses with bread and milk will upgrade the house, enabling more workers to live in it.

Supplying a house like this is itself the culmination of a chain of different processes.

To supply bread you need a crop farm to produce the wheat, a bakery within range of the farm to turn that wheat into a loaf, and a poor market within range of the bakery to sell that bread to local houses. Citizens won't just rock up at the market automatically either. You must establish sales routes through individual neighbourhoods, at which point your market vendors will take the bread, milk, etc to the houses.

## IT'S ANCIENT HISTORY

Initially, *Nebuchadnezzar* seems like an ideal chillout experience, one to while away an evening building increasingly lavish districts and chipping away at your temple or hanging gardens using the custom monument designer. Unfortunately,

**Successful city management involves mastering logistics**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A retro styled city-builder.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£16

**DEVELOPER**  
Nepos Games

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,  
Nvidia GeForce 2080  
Super, 32 GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[nepos.games/nebuchadnezzar](https://nepos.games/nebuchadnezzar)

the deeper you delve into the game, the more stressful the experience becomes. Establishing distribution routes for your market vendors becomes a chore in any settlement. Not only must you establish a new route for every vendor in the city, you'll also have to alter the route whenever you add buildings to that area, which you do constantly.

It can be difficult to identify problems within your production chain. In one mission, I had a warehouse overflowing with beer, but the nearby markets simply would not distribute it, no matter what I did. The consequences for a break in your production chain can be severe too. At one point, a single warehouse in my city became overstuffed with bread and could no longer accept milk. Within five minutes my working classes had completely abandoned the city, a problem that took half an hour to rectify.

*Nebuchadnezzar*'s biggest issue has to do with trade. You can only construct new buildings by spending gold, and gold is earned only through trading with other cities. But cities will only deign to trade with you once you reach a certain prestige level, and even then, you have to butter them up with a (usually substantial) gift first. Because of these significant initial demands, it's entirely possible to build yourself into a corner, where you run out of money and cannot earn any more.

There's much about *Nebuchadnezzar* to appreciate, from its wonderful presentation to its dynamic city simulation. But the core systems are too stern and austere compared to the payoff of successfully building your city. It isn't lacking for class, but really needs to dial up the fun factor. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Nebuchadnezzar*'s city-building fun is hindered by micromanagement and trading issues.

64

## HAPPY FOLK What it takes to get a house to max level

LEVEL 1  
Default

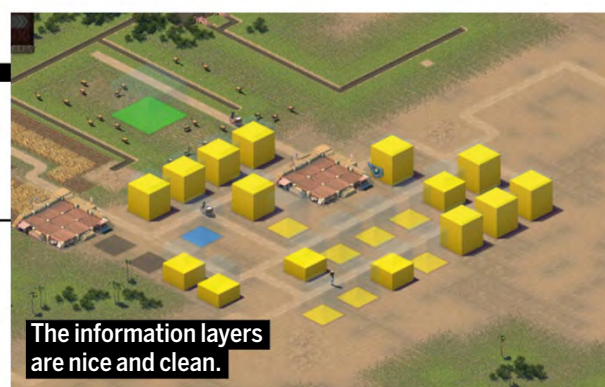
LEVEL 2  
Bread  
Milk

LEVEL 3  
Ceramics  
Water

LEVEL 4  
Tablet maker  
Beer



Market vendors travel through towns to sell their wares, somewhat defeating the point of having a market.



The Great Milk Revolt of 3000 BC was, as one historian put it, "A royal pain in the arse".



Trading is the only way to earn money, which can become a serious problem.





# TO HELL AND BACK

Some cool and clever ideas come together, but are **HELLSIGN**'s bad jujus worth the squeeze? *By Robert Zak*

**W**ell this is an oddly paced game – but it's also a game with vision. *HellSign* casts you as a ghost hunter in an Australian town decimated by demons, and populated by the very worst scummers and vagabonds who seek their fortunes there in a kind of ghoulish gold rush.

You're one of these undesirables, carrying out missions for the skeevers at the local bar to make some money... and to work out why there's a demon inside you that brings you back from the dead whenever you perish.

You pick your missions from a map screen, where you can see the type of contract, its difficulty, and its location type. You gain XP and build a character based on your desired playstyle – be that a researcher, gunslinger, or trapmaster. Once you're in a mission it's a mishmash of gunfights against monsters and hunting for clues, using an arsenal of weaponry, traps, and paranormal-tracking paraphernalia.

The best tools are the ones that feed into the game's hideously good sound design – mics that pick up manic laughter and spooky chanting, or the radio device that you tune to track demonic whispers. Using these tools, heat sensors for areas affected by tendrils, and plenty of corpse-rummaging, you track down signs and get an idea of where the ghoulies lie in wait to ambush you, letting you flip the script back on them with the right preparation.

Each monster has distinct patterns, and learning them is a big part of the fun. Ghouls cling to ceilings and trees, so fight them in open spaces; shadow beasts hate UV light and can pull you into another dimension; while scuttling enemies like spiders and giant centipedes are best funnelled through narrow spaces and killed with fire.

Your defences rely on a mix of dodge-rolling and making sure your armour has enough stability, lest you get stunlocked to death. *HellSign*

Many of your perfectly timed dodge-rolls will be right into walls

doesn't quite have the precision and responsiveness to incorporate these *Souls*-like combat elements smoothly, which leads to some frustrating

moments. The awkwardness is compounded by your limited vision, which means that many of your perfectly timed dodge-rolls will be right into walls, tree roots, or dining chairs that block your path.

You get to do some baby detective work too. Gather enough signs and evidence on a mission, and you can cross-reference the body parts and blood splatters you find with those in

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A paranormal investigation shooter with RPG elements

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15

**DEVELOPER**  
Ballistic Interactive

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X,  
Radeon 5700XT, 15GB  
RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No  
**LINK**  
[ballisticinteractive.com](http://ballisticinteractive.com)

your beautifully stylised demonic encyclopaedia. Do your deductions right, and you'll find out the nature and weaknesses of the optional boss that awaits at the end of each level.

## BAD OMENS

*HellSign* has a solid gameplay loop, but the early-mid-game is a chore. The three environment types quickly grow stale, and the imprecise early-game tracking equipment results in you spending too much time searching for signs.

In combat meanwhile, you'll hit pretty rigid difficulty walls where you'll struggle to progress without the relevant upgrades. But you can't just save up and buy the right equipment and tools, because most of the things you can wear are locked behind skill points, forcing you to jump through the double loop of XP and money grind. It means a lot of retreading the same few environments and a lot of XP spent on just getting the essentials rather than building a bespoke character.

Despite all this, after about 12 hours I actually started having a good time. I found the perfect tools to zero in on signs efficiently, I had enough battery power to anticipate ambushes, I understood beasts' behaviours, and I was fully utilising equipment like traps and night-vision goggles. I felt efficient and professional, doing that wanky thing where I'd adjust my headset's earcup with a stern frown on my face while tuning my ghost radio. Finally, I had become the grimy ghostbuster I always wanted to be.

*HellSign* is a down-and-dirty game in both style and spirit. There is a satisfying pay-off if you keep on at it, but the journey to get there sure is an arduous one. ■

## FINDING THE FUN

### Tools of the trade



#### FIRST AID

No matter how good you are at dodging, you'll be getting hit a lot. This skill will let you use medkits.



#### TRAPPER

Forget grenades and baits, traps are much more fundamental to the game. Get them ASAP.



#### PRIMARY WEAPONS

Reload times can be a real killer in *HellSign*, so unlock this skill to avoid those penalties.



#### MAGNIGHT BLACKLIGHT

This useful tool will make clue-gathering much less of a slog early in the game.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*HellSign* is an incredibly tense, atmospheric game that's tangled in the tendrils of poor pacing and lots of grinding.

65



Expect interdimensional doors, glitching, and other surreal disturbances the deeper you go.

There's a lucrative job for whoever's willing to clean up the bloody mess you leave behind.

## Overworld Tasks

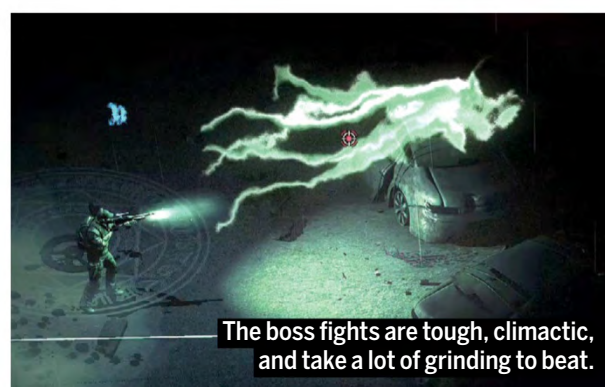
Head to the bar and find Banjo



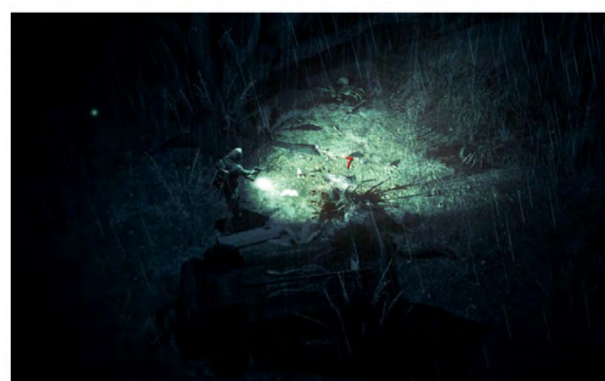
Skills offer some build variety, but some should be integrated with your character from the off.



The deciphering and deduction aspects of the game are simple rather than serious sleuthery.



The boss fights are tough, climactic, and take a lot of grinding to beat.





# DREAM ON

**LITTLE NIGHTMARES II** is a horror fan's dream come true. *By Stacey Henley*

**T**arsier Studios' *Little Nightmares II* is a horror game which understands modern horror in ways most games haven't wrapped their heads around. The Babadook, Midsommar, Hereditary... these iconic modern films have eschewed jump scares in favour of slowly building chills, unsettling atmosphere, and a constant sense of dread. *Little Nightmares II*, much like its predecessor, laces all of these feelings through its gameplay while others in the genre are still focusing on things that go bump in the night.

Speaking of wrapping your head around things, *Little Nightmares II* serves up what I'm pretty sure, even early on as we are, will be my biggest videogame chill of the year. In *Little Nightmares II*, you play as a small boy trying to make his way through a world full of oversized, horrific looking grown-ups, and one of these grown-ups is a strict, elderly school teacher. That already sounds scary, so imagine my terror when her neck starts to slither out from her shoulders with a deeply sinister twitch. Eventually, it becomes a little overused and loses its sting, but the game always seems to know when a monster's terror has become diluted, and shuffles them out for a new, often more horrific, beast.

Even when the game over-eggs it a bit, you have to give it credit for how much variation it squeezes into levels which, at first glance, seem incredibly similar. It's hard to find a screenshot which doesn't have a greyish-blue hue, deliberately underlit, with one small glow around the player character and something lumpy looming in the shadowy background. Just looking at the images in isolation, you'd be forgiven for thinking the art style would get old after a while. However, thanks to some intelligent level design puzzles and a relatively short runtime, it never really does.

This is helped by the fact the set pieces are so strange and compelling that they become the centre of attention. As well as the snake-necked school teacher, there's an old

horror staple in the walls of grabbing hands, as well as a bizarre puzzle where you need to find different chess piece toppers to complete the set. The king's topper, rather than the wooden ornament, is instead a – possibly once living – puppet boy, slumped over the chess piece, eyes closed, limbs roped in place, with a small, yellow crown on his noggin.

**Even the more elaborate puzzles never get too frustrating**

## DON'T LOOK NOW

It's tempting to keep talking about *Little Nightmares II*'s visuals, but while the aesthetics do play a big part

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A horror-infused platformer which gets creepier the deeper you go

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£25

**DEVELOPER**  
Tarsier Studios

**PUBLISHER**  
Bandai Namco Entertainment

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i7-8750H, Nvidia GTX 1050 Ti 4GB, 6 GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/3aSnAdR](http://bit.ly/3aSnAdR)

in elevating the game's inherent creepiness, the gameplay doesn't just exist to lead you from one scene to the next. It offers very little instruction or handholding (apart from the literal handholding mechanic with your partner, Six), but that suits the eerie tones, and such trust in the player is welcome.

For being a 2.5 platformer, *Little Nightmares II* makes the most of open spaces. You can wander off into the background and explore, finding hidden collectibles or Easter eggs nestled away. There are still limits to this – the camera remains fixed and eventually you'll hit an invisible wall – but it makes the levels feel more like actual places and not like simple A to B throughlines as some sections can feel like in other sidescrollers.

While exploration makes the levels more expansive than they initially appear to be, the puzzles often happen in small, truncated spaces. This makes it much easier to explore every nook and cranny for that hidden key, that secret lever, that solution satanically scrawled on the wall in erratic chalk markings. As a result, even the more elaborate ones never get too frustrating, because you always know the solution is here somewhere, you just have to find it.

Unfortunately, whether it happens in big spaces or small spaces, the combat is pretty bad. Thankfully, it's used sparingly, but if you ever have to fight your way out of a situation, prepare to be endlessly frustrated. That's because all the melee weapons you're provided with are too big for you, so you have to drag them across the floor, heave them up, then crash them down. Trying to get the timing right is tricky. *Little Nightmares II* gets most things right, but the combat is a swing and a (very slow) miss. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Little Nightmares II* from Tarsier Studios understands exactly what it wants to be, and mostly pulls it off.

**76**

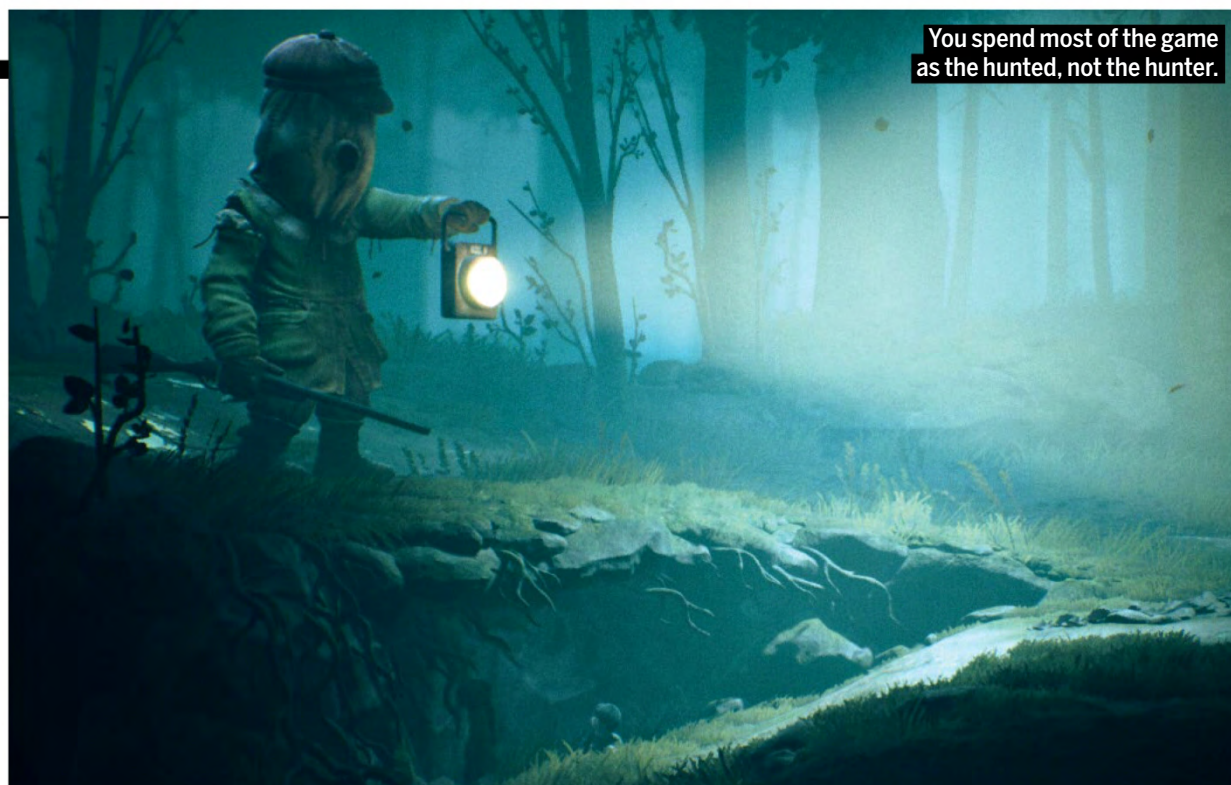


## THE HELP

*Six, your companion throughout the game, has many uses*

- 1 Giving you puzzle hints.
- 2 Helping you move heavy objects.
- 3 Giving you a boost up ledges.
- 4 Throwing ropes down for you.
- 5 Reaching out a hand to help you leap across valleys.
- 6 Getting kidnapped, and therefore giving you a purpose in life!



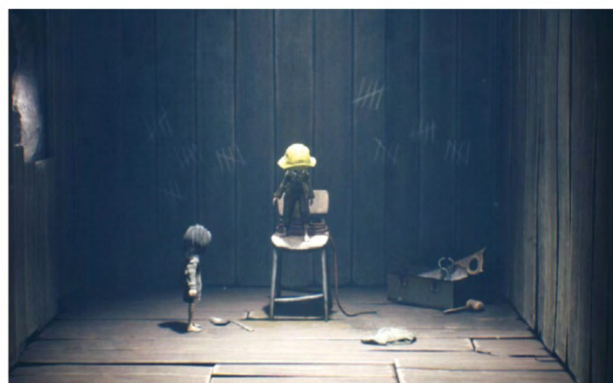


You spend most of the game as the hunted, not the hunter.



Ladling out death.

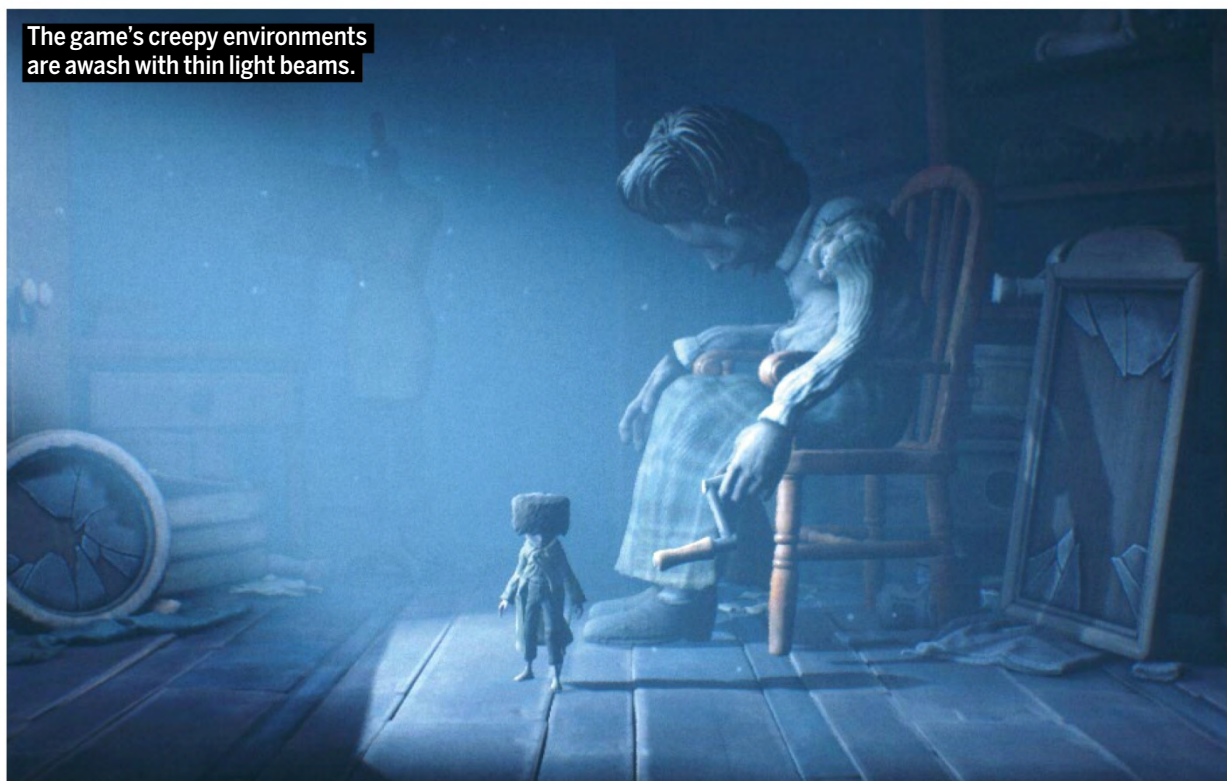
Buckets on strings = death, Home Alone style.



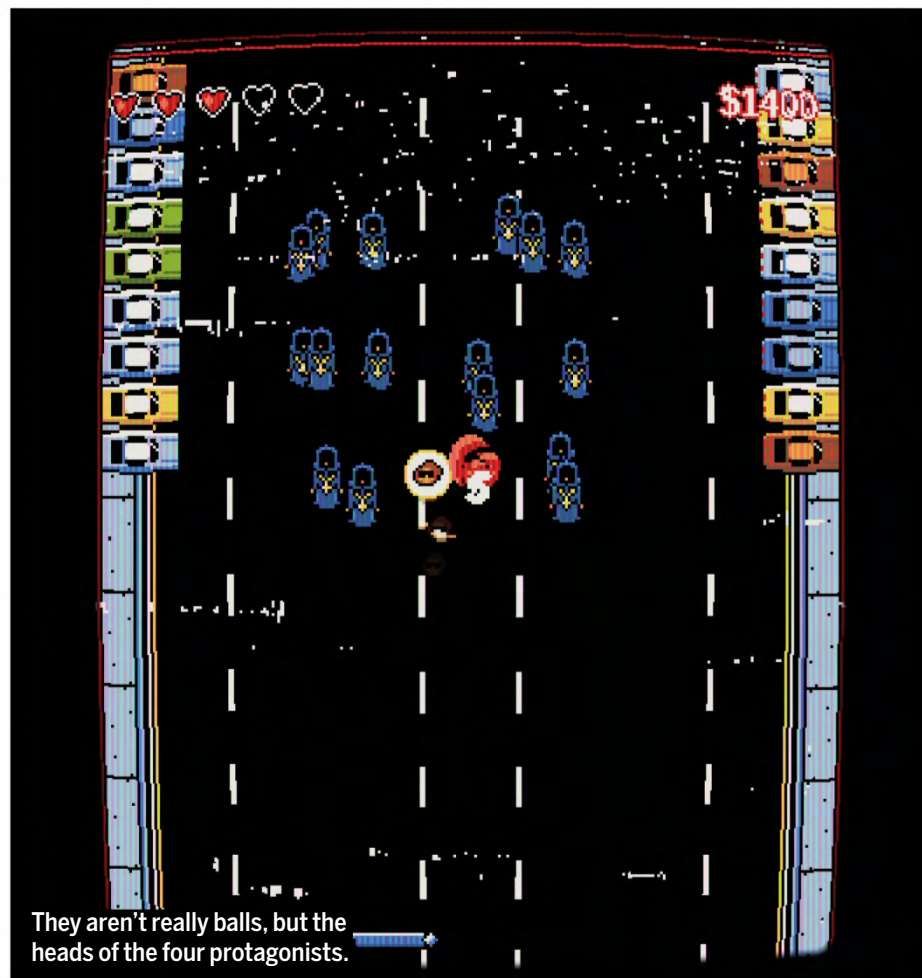
The game's creepy environments are awash with thin light beams.



Is someone in here?







## THAT'S A PADDLING

Breaking new ground in the Stranger Things-inspired **LOCUST, U.S.A.**

I've never been much of a fan of *Breakout*, the venerable, pinball-esque arcade game where you shunt a ball around using a paddle. There's a lot of tedious waiting round while the ball slowly does its thing, then a few moments of frantic paddling as you try to both catch the ball and direct it to somewhere useful. I'm not saying that *Locust, U.S.A.* has converted me, but it has made *Breakout* fun, and I'm not sure I would have thought that possible.

Basically, this is *Breakout* but Stranger Things, with every stage of the game themed around a creepy high school or facility, and with sumptuous synths warbling over the top. You're still trying to whack blocks with a paddle and ball, but here those blocks are joined by enemies and switches, collectible coins, and letters that spell out 'LOCUST' (that's the name of the town). Every one of the handful of levels is markedly different, in location and layout, but also in its objectives – although you're generally trying to unlock/bust open a door, and then go through it. Interstitial bonus stages offer the chance to improve your score, while random events keep things interesting by doling out boons, or occasionally curses, multiple times during each level.

**Every stage is surprising – right up until the cliffhanger ending**

The theme of this is such fun. Stranger Things is the primary flavour, but there's also a dollop of '80s horror movies, and a big, Tron-shaped crouton at the top of the pot. I suppose that sounds a bit messy, but it just means that every stage is surprising – right up until the abrupt cliffhanger ending. My favourite thing about *Locust*, however, is how it builds on the ancient *Breakout* formula. As with a physical pinball table, you can 'nudge' the screen to alter the trajectory of the ball, giving you a tiny bit of input while the thing is ricocheting around the level. It sounds like cheating, and I'm sure in real pinball it is, but here it's limited by a timer that ensures you can't over-indulge. It just offers a little *oomph* to get you out of tricky situations – or dump you in them

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
*Breakout* meets pinball meets Stranger Things. And why not?

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
Harley Wilson

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/LocustUSA](http://bit.ly/LocustUSA)

when you nudge at the wrong moment. It's a nifty 'gamble' button, and it's not the only random thing 've found in *Locust*.

### UPSIDE DOWN

There's also the event meter, which fills up automatically as you play. When the bar is full, a slot machine starts rolling, and you're either given a tasty reward or a kick in the shins. You might be given a bit of health back, or watch your paddle shrink before your eyes, or be gifted with a couple more balls to shunt around. These events, and the bonus stages, can be turned off in the options menu, but they don't swing the action too wildly, and I enjoy the element of chance they introduce.

Even more than the theming, it's these quiet innovations that kept me interested in *Locust*. Whether they improve the *Breakout* formula, or just distract from it, I'm not sure, but I could play a whole lot more of this strange mash-up. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

A great theme and solid innovations make this a worthy play for fans – and non-fans – of *Breakout*.

78



# WELL, WELL, WELL

Water works in creative puzzler **OVERFLOW**

The well of block-pushing puzzle games is not dry yet, and here's another standout example in the form of *Overflow*: a game about sloshing water around in a bucket. You play as a cute little gardener attempting to water a bunch of plants, while trying to avoid watering the weeds placed all over the ground. There's also a well that gradually fills, before overflowing with water. If that happens, you'll fail the stage and have to restart.

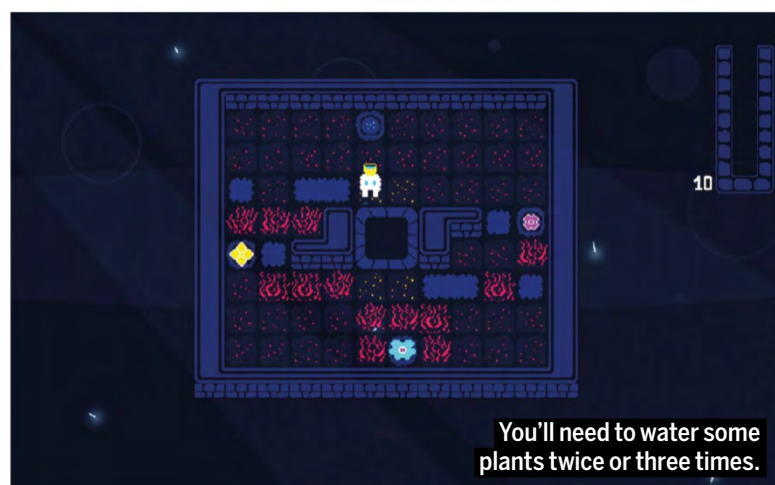
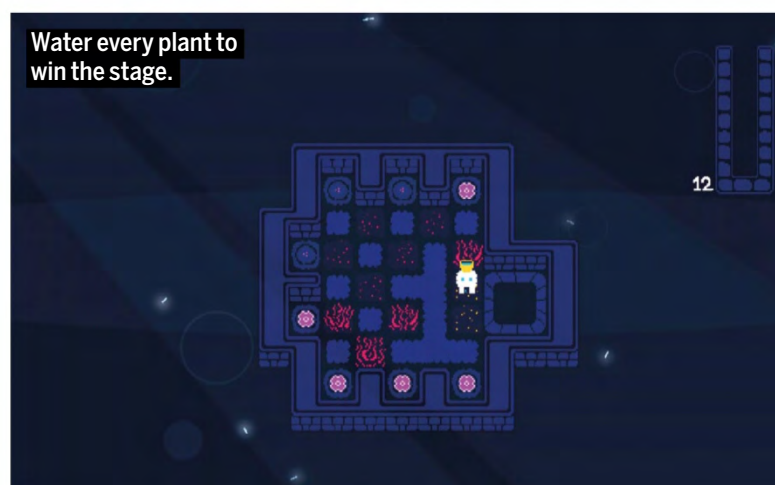
So yes, this is a *little* more complicated to grasp than many block-pushing games – there are no blocks, and no pushing for that matter, but it's the same grid-based puzzling beneath the surface. The difference being the bucket, which allows you to ferry water from the well to all the thirsty, thirsty plants, but that will also leak onto every

other tile you visit. If you step on a weed while carrying water, it will turn into a movement-blocking bush on the next turn, and that's clearly a bit of a hindrance in a game like this.

Every single action matters here. You have to be extremely careful over your order of movement, although levels are short enough that restarting them is not really that much of a big deal. The concept soon expands with plants that need to be watered multiple times, and in increasingly demanding layouts. It's a strong, inventive premise that's only lightly explored in *Overflow*, but part of me likes that it hasn't been wrung for all it's worth – there's room to grow.

While I doubt I'll be able to recall it in a few weeks' time, this is the kind of quietly inventive puzzler that will perk you up on a dreary afternoon and it's better than doing real back-breaking gardening. ■

74



## NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
Free

DEVELOPER  
shmoozey

LINK  
[shmoozey.itch.io](https://shmoozey.itch.io)

# PARADISE FOUND

Deciphering **CASTAWAY ON A WEIRD ISLAND**

At first, *Castaway* is just utterly baffling. What does all that stuff on the screen mean? Even with the aid of the help button, it was quite a few runs before I understood it – but I'm hugely impressed by what's going on. It's a roguelike/puzzle game reminiscent of *Minesweeper* and *sudoku*, as it's all about making educated guesses in stages that are swathed in a fog of war.

You're a castaway on a desert island – or should I say *islands*, as you're forever leaving one blob of rock for another filled with hidden enemies and power-ups. Ignoring all that stuff at the screen borders for a moment, you can just uncover each tile randomly, by blundering into a scorpion, or a skeleton, or a restorative spa with the mouse or arrow keys, before you either find the raft and progress, or you die. That

would be fun enough, I suppose, but those borders are actually a veritable trove of information.

Let's start from the left. That pile of icons informs you of enemies and objects that are adjacent to one another, though not *where* exactly they're located in the world. The icons at the top tell you, 'this thing is in this column *somewhere*', while the table on the right lists any objects near the sea, and how many aquatic tiles are surrounding them. So that's three types of clues to jumble satisfyingly in your head, though you're never given quite enough to eliminate the need for guesswork.

That's *great*, frankly. What would a roguelike be without an element of risk, after all? It's the secret ingredient that binds this heady concoction together, and it's kept me returning time and again to try and improve my score. ■

82



## NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
Free

DEVELOPER  
Captain Games

LINK  
[captaingames.itch.io](https://captaingames.itch.io)



## THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



I've honestly fluffed shots like this.



# BRIAN XENO

## Fighting for my future in **XCOM 2**

**I**t's standard practice with an *XCOM* game to rename your troops after your friends. You can throw the ones you like less recklessly into battle. Or perform heroic deeds using the people you slightly fancy so you have a fresh reason to initiate conversation. But we like to push boundaries here at PC Gamer, so I'm entrusting no less than my potential happiness to *XCOM 2*.

Instead of friends, I'm naming my squad after possible futures. It will break my heart to watch some of them die, so I'm hoping rookies Screenwriter and Bake Off Winner will inspire me to take extra care. I'm less worried about Deliveroo Driver. And although all this sounds a bit silly, *XCOM 2* is so good that what starts as a joke quickly becomes a knuckle-whitening obsession. I have to keep Screenwriter alive at any cost, and not just because she wears a cool bandana and has been promoted three times.

There are other reasons to be invested. The opening missions, which establish the unlikely, heroic return of your commander, make me feel personally responsible for every death, which is appropriate given there's literally nobody else to blame. "But I had a 67% chance to hit!" is no

excuse for carelessness. I love the gathering storm of the setting. It was hard enough to win an ongoing war in the original *XCOM*, let alone one that humans already lost 20 years ago. The stakes are deliciously high and that collective desperation makes me take it all very seriously, even if my squad names suggest the opposite.

The game doesn't waste any time keeping me safe. Even the tutorial features a hopeless death, as if to acclimatise me to the

constant spectre of failure. And, sure enough, I lose one of my career choices in the first mission. So long, Director: if I wanted you to live I should probably have studied film, not law. (I can always be a producer instead.) I barely have time to adjust to this loss before things get worse. I've forgotten that *XCOM* rarely lets you sit back and wait for conflict to

### Sure enough, I lose one of my career choices in the first mission

### NEED TO KNOW

#### WHAT IS IT?

A crash course in learning to deal with failure. Plus aliens

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£35

**DEVELOPER**  
Firaxis Games

**PUBLISHER**  
2K

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP  
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,  
NVIDIA GeForce GTX  
1070, Windows 10

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/37l4hlm](http://bit.ly/37l4hlm)

come to you. Instead, the game twists and surprises like a belligerent eel.

### CASHING OUT

One of the sectoid enemies mind controls Millionaire from a distance, essentially turning them into a human explosion who's happy to destroy themselves if it means killing my team. I can't risk it. And so, in what might turn out to be a depressing snapshot of the future, I sacrifice wealth for creativity: Screenwriter ends Millionaire with a sniper round to the head. A more superstitious man might take this as proof that I'll never get rich writing, but it's not going to stop me calling a character 'Billionaire'. And if that fails I'll settle for 'Comfortable' and never let them go on a mission.

By the end of the mission all I have left is my heroic Screenwriter and a gravely wounded Pianist. Thankfully, Mall Santa is waiting back at base, ready to get stuck in if my fortunes fail to improve. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

The sort of game that demands your attention no matter how flippantly you approach it. It's tactical brilliance.

91



# FLOOD DAMAGE

Pretend the last 14 years didn't happen with **HALO 3**

**H**onestly, what is the point of re-reviewing *Halo 3*?" you might say. "It's perfect." You are correct. But it's important I confirm it's perfect in the way I want. I need to know I can set up a custom game via Steam with the settings I like and the weapons I prefer, and play the same four maps until I turn to dust. I'm pleased to report that, unlike the original release of *The Master Chief Collection*, this is mostly possible.

There are a few hurdles to get over. I have to log into my Microsoft account before I can even get to the menu, which is the sort of thing that should appear on a BuzzFeed list of things that make you irrationally angry alongside accidentally yanking out your earphones. Even the chipper way the game asks boils my piss. "Let's get you signed in." Don't talk to me like that, game. You're not a

cuddly nan pouring me hot chocolate to lift my spirits on a dreary day. Let me sign in *after* I get to the main menu, because *this is my game and I'll do what I want*.

The purist in me hates that I can't limit the weapons on the map to the classic *Halo 3* selections, too. Yes, I want random weapons, but I don't want that bullshit Sentinel Beam. And 343's wretched menus mean that even changing teams is now a faff.

So now I've got 50 words left to justify that score. Multiplayer is magnificent – an echo of childhood gaming sessions where hours fall away like clumps of snow. The maps are so good that even now, 14 years and thousands of games later, I'm still finding fresh angles and tactics. The interplay of weapons is peerless. Even if every game of *Halo 3* was hidden behind a cursed wall, I'd still risk it just to play 2v2 on Blackout. ■

94



Switching weapons here would be admitting defeat.



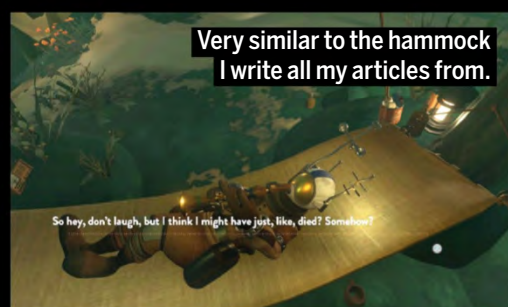
If you play *Halo* you can hear this green.

## NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£7

DEVELOPER  
343 Interactive

PUBLISHER  
Xbox Game Studios

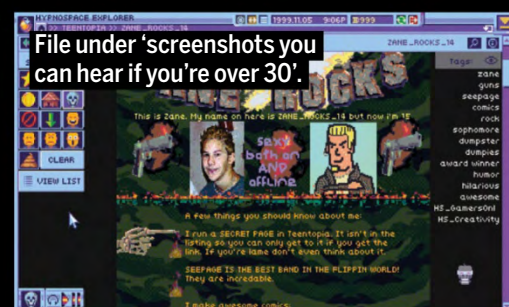


Very similar to the hammock I write all my articles from.

## OUTER WILDS

**P**erhaps *Outer Wilds* is the worst game imaginable for someone as easily distracted as me. I find it hard enough to even get off my folksy home planet without checking on its inhabitants, let alone traverse a neat galaxy of interesting things in search of buried truth. It's like trying to make a Labrador traverse a snack corridor just so he can do long division. Thankfully, the central mystery in *Outer Wilds* is compelling enough that I'm happy to repeatedly hop into my ship and jet into space, even if I do it so often I begin to see wooden launch towers in my sleep. I don't even mind that the autopilot flew me directly through the middle of the sun. Technically, that's my fault. ■

86



## HYPNOSPACE OUTLAW

**A**lright, so I've gone for a loose theme of space this month – but I never specified what kind of space. And there's something about *Hypnospace Outlaw* that's both comforting and deeply unsettling. It's pleasant because it recalls a simpler time of dial-up modems, constantly-engaged phone lines, and comedy AOL email notifications. But it's also harrowing, because what feels like recent history is now a period piece for some people. The stuff on display here is further in the theoretical past than the setting of *That '70s Show* was in the '90s. Thankfully, the gentle detective work on offer here is a compelling distraction from the grinding wheel of time that will pulverise us all. ■

80



Are solar flares the real enemy? No, it's other people.

## CATASTRONAUTS

**W**hile 'Overcooked in space' isn't a very accurate description for *Catastronauts* – that would just be rehydrating bags of curry and sucking up gobbets of energy drink as they floated past. Which, to be fair, is a game I'd definitely play. This is more like a 3D, multiplayer *FTL*, where everything goes wrong at once and you watch your hopes and dreams turn to cosmic debris. It's much more fun than I've made it sound, and at least this way you have somebody else to blame when everything explodes. ■

71



# IF I HAD SOMEWHERE TO LIVE...

## I COULD GO ANYWHERE IN LIFE



When Abi's mum died, life got tough. She didn't get on with her dad and the arguments became violent. Abi felt her only choice was to leave home. With just the clothes on her back, and no idea where to go, she ended up sleeping on the streets in the freezing cold.

**Right now, you could give a homeless young person like Abi somewhere to start their future**

Abi's life changed when she was given a room at Centrepont. A safe place to sleep and recover. A place to develop the skills and confidence she needed to rebuild her life – and leave homelessness behind for good. Now, Abi believes she can go anywhere.

Thousands of homeless young people like Abi are desperately trying to find their place in the world – but first they need a place to start again. **You could help right now by sponsoring a room at Centrepont for just 40p a day.**

We know this support changes lives. 88% of the young people we help move on positively in life. So please, help someone like Abi today. **Thank you.**

**Text PLACE to 78866 to donate £3**

**Call free on 0800 472 5798**

**Visit [centrepont.org.uk/place](http://centrepont.org.uk/place)**

**Or complete and return the form below**

**SPONSOR A ROOM. HELP A HOMELESS YOUNG PERSON FIND THEIR PLACE.**

### YES, I WANT TO SPONSOR A ROOM FOR £12 A MONTH

Please collect my payment on the 1st/15th of every month (please circle preferred date).

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To the Manager:  
Name and full address of your  
Bank or Building Society:

Originators Identification No. **6 5 9 1 0 7**

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) of Account Holder(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Bank Sort Code:    -    -    Account Number:

Instructions to your Bank or Building Society: Please pay Centrepont Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction, subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Centrepont and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society.

Signature(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account.

**Increase your donation by 25p for every £1 you donate with Gift Aid** *giftaid it*

☐ By ticking this box I confirm I am a UK taxpayer and want Centrepont to Gift Aid all donations I've made in the last four years and any donations I make in the future until I notify you otherwise. I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in any tax year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations it is my responsibility to pay any difference.

Your name and address are needed to identify you as a current UK taxpayer.

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We'd love to show the impact of your support and share how young people continue to need your help, through newsletters, fundraising appeals and information about events. Please let us know how best to stay in touch with you by adding your details above, and ticking the relevant boxes:

☐ **Please contact me by email** ☐ **Please contact me by phone**

Last year our supporters helped us change the lives of over 15,000 homeless young people. By letting us know we can count on you, we can continue helping young people with a home and a future.

**Your privacy is key.**

We promise never to sell or swap your details, and will always keep them secure. You can view our Privacy Notice in full at [www.centrepont.org.uk/privacy](http://www.centrepont.org.uk/privacy). You can opt out of post and change how we communicate with you at any time. Please call **0800 232320** and speak to one of our friendly team or email [supportercare@centrepont.org](mailto:supportercare@centrepont.org) to do this and ask us any questions.

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# HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

96

## GROUP TEST

The best mechanical keyboards around.

100

## TECH REPORT

Will Gabe Newell control our minds one day?



102

## BUYER'S GUIDE

Three great builds to get you started, no matter your budget.





## GROUP TEST

# MECHANICAL KEYBOARDS

Can you even call it a mechanical keyboard if it doesn't make a satisfying clack? *By Jacob Ridley*



1

OFFERS HIGH FLEXIBILITY  
WITHOUT SACRIFICING  
FUNCTIONALITY



2





**T**he wonderful thing about PC gaming is that just about anything can be an input device if you try hard enough, yet I can think of no better way to game than by making a ruckus with every lovely button press on a mechanical keyboard.

The sweet, slick key press of a mechanical switch will have your fingers feeling less fatigued, your response times swifter, and your key presses more absolute. There's also room for more personalisation beyond the rubber dome. From a smooth linear action to a typewriter-esque clack, and a range of RGB lighting configurations, there's something for everyone in the land of mech boards.

That's why we've rounded up a selection of gaming keyboards for this month's group test – everything from wireless low-profile kit to the latest in optical switch tech – to find out which are worthy of your dextrous digits.

## G915 wireless

LOGITECH £210

### Smooth going without a wire

**1** If you must pick up a wireless keyboard then the Logitech G915 is a fine candidate. You'll be required to spend a little bit more for wireless functionality over what we tend to see for wired mechanical keyboards with similar features – the Logitech G915 is £210. There's a cheaper TKL version, but not so much so that we'd instantly recommend it over the full-size model.

What you get for that cash investment is a sleek and sturdy board plated in brush aluminium. There's some smart media controls in the upper right-hand corner of the board, including a

lovely volume wheel, and there's a handful of macro keys down the left-side of the keyboard. These can be programmed to whatever you see fit on a per-app or per-game basis from within the Logitech G software.

Beneath that stylish exterior lies fantastically responsive Kailh-made GL key switches. You can pick from linear, tactile, or clicky, and we recommend the latter if you really want to make a racket while playing.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Decent battery life
- Top quality build
- Snappy low-profile switches

**SPECS** SWITCH: GL LOW-PROFILE / **SIZE:** FULL-SIZE (TKL AVAILABLE) / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGH:** NONE / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRIST REST:** NONE / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **CONNECTION:** LIGHTSPEED WIRELESS

## GMMK

GLORIOUS £129

### Flexible and customisable

**2** Known to most as the GMMK, the Glorious Modular Mechanical Keyboard offers high flexibility without sacrificing functionality. That's namely down to the inclusion of a hot-swappable base board able to be fitted with a vast range of mechanical key switches for expansive customisation.

Pick up 105 switches of your choice, or a combination of a few, and you can mix-and-match to your liking – no solder required. There are also a few standard options from Gateron and Kailh if you prefer to make a single purchase. Each offers a slightly different twist on the

firm linear favourites, from tactile and clicky sets to switches with rapid actuation.

To do all that while retaining RGB lighting is pretty damn impressive as well, and the included keycaps make sure this board shines bright amongst the others. I just wish it had some discrete media keys to top it all off. However, when it's available for around half the cost of the next keyboard on this list, these omissions are easily forgiven.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Interchangeable switches
- Minimal style
- Damned affordable

**SPECS** SWITCH: INTERCHANGEABLE / **SIZE:** FULL-SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGH:** NONE / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** FUNCTION KEY SHORTCUTS / **WRIST REST:** SOLD SEPARATELY / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **CONNECTION:** WIRED



## GROUP TEST



HANDLES PRETTY MUCH  
EVERYTHING YOU  
COULD WANT FROM A  
GAMING KEYBOARD

3

### K100 RGB Platinum Optical

CORSAIR £229

As good as mechanical keyboards can currently get

**3** There's no getting away from the fact that this is a serious pile of cash to drop on a keyboard. An absolutely impressive keyboard, to be sure, that handles pretty much everything you could want from a gaming keyboard, but it's fair to say that there are plenty of cheaper keyboards that also tick that particular box.

It's the myriad of extras that sets this apart from the rest though, and not just the per-key RGB lighting, although that is impressive. The volume wheel has a reassuring solidity and the media keys work well, while the new control wheel offers up even

more immediacy to your shortcuts. There's also the 4,000Hz polling rate and 1mm actuation point to help drive home that you are in control while gaming with it.

Despite using optical switches it's worth noting that it doesn't support variable actuation points or analog input. Instead, Corsair has focused purely on the more-traditional mechanical keyboard experience, and that's something it nails brilliantly.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Responsive optical switches
- All the RGB, all the time
- Premium build quality

**SPECS** SWITCH: CORSAIR OPX / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGH:** USB / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRIST REST:** DETACHABLE / **KEYCAPS:** PBT DOUBLE-SHO / **CONNECTION:** WIRED (USB)

### Everest Max

MOUNTAIN £230

A seriously solid, ultra-versatile board

**4** If you want to go all the way with the Mountain Everest gaming keyboard then you can find yourself down a rather expensive rabbit hole. But down in that particular den you can craft a board to suit your every whim, should you be able to afford it.

The Everest Core Barebones is the heart of the package, a brushed aluminium tenkeyless RGB board that you can buy without switches or keycaps, for you to build your own custom keyboard however you want. If that seems too much effort you can pick the Everest up in TKL form with the standard Core, its

simple black keys and choice of Cherry MX mechanical switches.

Go further and you can add a numpad – which attaches on either side of the board – and a media control with customisable LCD display. As a newcomer to the market, the Mountain software was initially an issue, but that has improved considerably since launch. It's a fantastic package, and one which has become a mainstay of my videogaming setup.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Your board, how you want it
- Really well built
- Neat LCD display

**SPECS** SWITCH: CHERRY MX RED, BLUE, BROWN, SILVER / **SIZE:** TKL OR FULL SIZE / **PASSTHROUGH:** USB / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRIST REST:** DETACHABLE (MAGNET) / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **CONNECTION:** WIRED USB TYPE-C



## WIRED OR WIRELESS?

For most PC gamers wireless connectivity is something of a nonessential – a wired model will offer simple and battery-free operation that will prove itself just as performant as any cable-free alternative.

Yet there are some cases where a wireless keyboard makes sense. Take those of us with standing desks, for example. A wireless board makes for one less cable run to worry about when shifting desk height. Similarly, if you're a fan of gaming from your couch then a wireless model makes it that much easier to get gaming in comfort.

Wireless keyboards also make for a cleaner desktop, if that's your thing. Although you'll have to worry about battery life, which can be a pain especially if you're already attempting to juggle multiple battery-powered devices.



4



5



6

## Huntsman v2 Analog

RAZER £250

So close, yet so far away...

**5** The promise of the Razer Huntsman v2 Analog is something quite spectacular in PC gaming terms. It offers the twin benefits of precision mouse and keyboard control and the fine, analogue control of a game pad's thumbsticks.

The new Razer Analog Optical Switches are designed to translate control all the way along the travel of the switch. That means a simple keyboard switch can become something akin to an analogue trigger, or a thumbstick, or even have dual operation. The example is to have the first actuation point equip a grenade

and the bottom of the travel prompt your in-game character to throw it.

The way it ought to work is you set a gaming profile in software, tie WSAD to simulate analog movement in-game, and you can finally use a mouse and keyboard to do the sort of stealthing about you've not previously been able to. But, in reality, it doesn't always hook into every game, and sometimes it disables my connected USB joypads entirely.

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

- Razer's switches go analogue
- Lovely new wrist rest
- Can disable USB controllers

**SPECS** SWITCH: RAZER ANALOG OPTICAL / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **PASSTHROUGH:** USB 3.0 / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRIST REST:** DETACHABLE (MAGNETIC RGB) / **KEYCAPS:** PBT DOUBLE-SHOT / **CONNECTION:** WIRED USB TYPE-A

## KM360

G.SKILL £56

Super bright, solid, and simple

**6** There is a trend towards £200+ gaming keyboards in the market at the moment, but that doesn't mean there aren't quality mechanical switch boards available at a more reasonable price. Often you'll find these more budget-oriented options offering cheap switches from other manufacturers, but the G.Skill KM360 comes featuring the classic Cherry MX Red linear switch out of the gate.

If you can't cope with your gaming board *not* lit up like a rainbow then you may be disappointed with the single-colour option, but damn, the

white LEDs on this G.Skill board are the brightest I've ever seen. Normally I like to keep at maximum brightness all day long, but the KM360 would burn out my retina if I did.

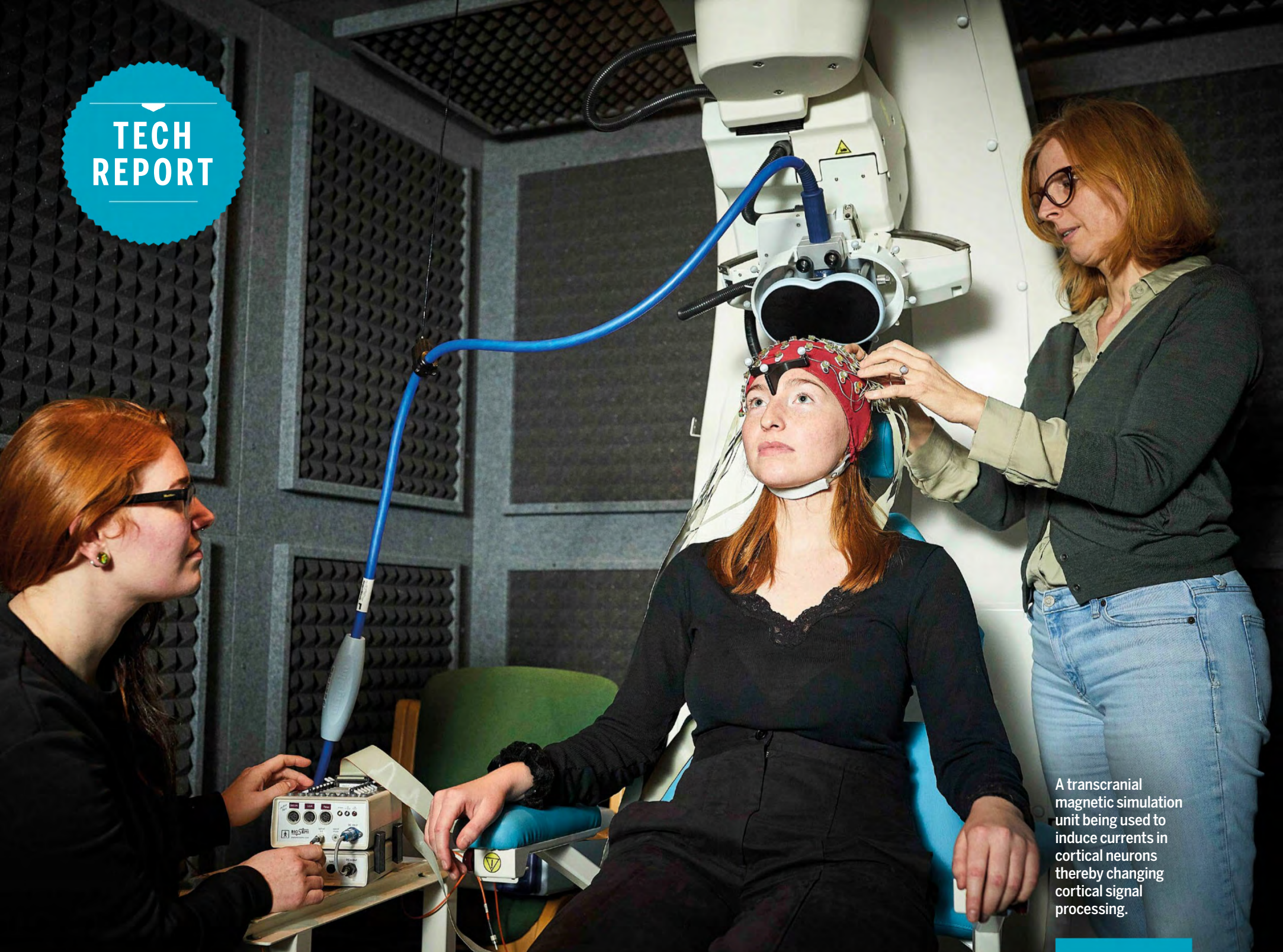
This TKL board is basic, but what it does, it does very well. It's solid, well-built, reliable and looks pretty decent too. There's no wrist rest, no passthrough, or media controls, but I'll happily give it a pass in favour of affordable functionality.

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

- Affordable
- Reliable Cherry MX switches
- Bright white LED

**SPECS** SWITCH: CHERRY MX RED / **SIZE:** TKL / **PASSTHROUGH:** NONE / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** INTEGRATED / **WRIST REST:** NONE / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **CONNECTION:** WIRED USB TYPE-C





A transcranial magnetic stimulation unit being used to induce currents in cortical neurons thereby changing cortical signal processing.

# DEEP THINKING

Could Gabe Newell's mind control dreams become reality?

**G**abe Newell, chief plumber at Valve and part-time *Half-Life 3* tease, held forth on New Zealand TV show 1 News earlier this year on the subject of brain-computer interfaces.

It turns out he's all in favour of them, and Valve is working on software to interpret the signals from our brains, using hardware described as being 'like a modified VR helmet'.

From our experience, that means it will be largely sampling from around the eye area, but that's probably where the 'modified' part comes in. He's been working with OpenBCI, a company taking an open-source approach to BCIs, and told 1 News, "If you're a software developer in 2022 who doesn't have one of these in your test lab, you're making a silly mistake." Wise words, indeed.

Newell has been hanging out in New Zealand to shelter from the pandemic, and BCIs seem to have become his pet project while he's out there. Newell's not necessarily talking about connecting you directly to your games, however, but reading your mind-state to improve the immersion of the interactive experience you're playing. If a BCI can measure whether you're excited, frightened, or elated, it can better tailor the experience to push those feelings further.

Newell took things another step, however, speculating about being able to write feelings back to the brain. "You're

used to experiencing the world through eyes," Newell said, "but eyes were created by this low-cost bidder that didn't care about failure rates and RMAs, and if it got broken there was no way to repair anything effectively, which totally makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, but is not at all reflective of consumer preferences.

"So the visual experience, the visual fidelity we'll be able to create – the real world will stop being the metric that we apply to the best possible visual fidelity. The real world will seem flat, colourless, blurry compared to the experiences you'll be able to create in people's brains. Where it gets weird is when who you are becomes editable through a BCI. One of the early applications I expect we'll see is improved sleep – sleep will become an app that you run where you say 'Oh I need this much sleep, I need this much REM.'"

## READ ONLY MEMORIES

Which sounds rather terrifying, but it is not out of the realms of possibility according to Professor Reinhold Scherer, who studies and builds BSIs at the University of Essex, "Neurostimulation can induce or evoke feelings, and also sleep," he explains. "The question is how targeted the stimulation must be to create a specific effect or perception. There are several invasive and non-invasive approaches to modulate cortical activity so, in principle, it is 'easy' to stimulate the brain."



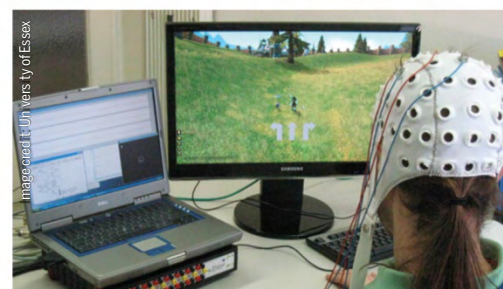
## Digging deeper

Planting electrodes in the brain has been used as a treatment for Parkinson's disease since 1997, and epilepsy since 2018. The implanted electrodes are powered by a battery pack under the skin, and after a week to settle are switched on and fiddled with until the maximum benefit is reached.





**FAR LEFT:** A multichannel EEG and eye-tracker being used in a videogame-like situation to study decision making.



**LOWER LEFT:** A volunteer plays *World of Warcraft* with his mind as part of a trial into BCIs.

## MIND OVER MATTER *How BCIs can be put to use*



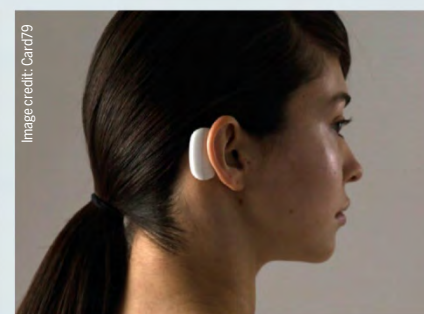
**1 TREATMENT** Deep brain stimulation can be used to treat Parkinson's disease.



**2 STIMULATION** And it can be used to treat OCD too – this X-ray shows a patient.



**3 HEARING** This baby's cochlear implant directly stimulates the auditory nerve.



**4 STYLE** This is the visible part of a Neuralink device, designed by Card79.

What's much harder, though, is stimulating, or reading, it accurately – at least without drilling holes in someone's skull. Elon Musk may brag about his monkey that can potentially play Pong through a BCI, but there's more Black & Decker than black magic involved there. "It's not an unhappy monkey," Musk said during a talk on Clubhouse, some sort of new social media app we don't really understand and can't be bothered to look into. "You can't even see where the neural implant was put in, except that he's got a slight dark mohawk." Which makes it OK, we guess.

As the monkey certainly discovered, there's hair, skin, a chunk of bone, some membranes and a layer of fluid between the surface of your brain and any electrodes that want to read its activity. The bits of your brain underneath are not always the same size or in the same place from person to person either, making calibration of a BCI a tricky process. "If you play a lot of piano, then probably your hand-eye coordination area will be larger than someone who plays [football], who will have more coordination with his feet," says Scherer. "When you're measuring from the outside, it's like being a reporter at a [football] stadium. You have a mic and a helicopter, and you're sent 5000m above the stadium and are asked to record a conversation between two people."

Put like that, we can see the attraction of lowering your mic further into the stadium by drilling through its osseous roof. In a 2016 Pew Research survey of US adults, however, only 34% were either 'very' or 'somewhat' enthusiastic about having chips implanted into their skulls, whereas a nice 69% were

either 'very' or 'somewhat' worried about the idea. The cyborgs of the future may be a rare breed.

Musk defines much of the population as cyborgs already, however, because we have a 'tertiary digital layer' provided by phones and PCs. "With a direct neural interface, we can improve the bandwidth between your cortex and your digital tertiary layer by many orders of magnitude," he said. "I'd say probably at least 1,000, or maybe 10,000, or more."

Back at Essex, where they have a strict no-drills policy, the impetus is on improving the sensitivity of electroencephalograph headsets, and training users to do things with them. Things such as playing *World of Warcraft*,

where it took about 20 hours for players to train their brains to emit the right signals.

Luckily, though, "Once you establish the specific pattern, it is rather robust," says Scherer. "I trained with the students, and we went on to do a different project that

interfaced to Google Earth so you could move around and play music from different countries." Having trained in *Cerebro-World-of-Warcraft*, it took much less time to start using Mental Google Earth.

There's a sense here of some very rich men speculating about the future of BCIs, and academics shaking their heads and raising signs that say "I think you'll find it's not as easy as that". Some limited BCIs are already with us, and whatever the pace of development, they'll keep coming until we're finally offered the opportunity to have a chip embedded in our motor cortex. Who amongst us would turn that down? ■

**Ian Evenden**

## MUSK DEFINES MUCH OF THE POPULATION AS CYBORGS ALREADY



YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *Budget build*

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

### *Mid-range build*

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

### *Advanced build*

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



**TOTAL**  
**£849**

|               |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B450-A Pro Max</b><br>MSI <b>£95</b><br>A healthy dose of ports and PCIe SSD support has this B450 at the heart of our budget build.                                               |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Ryzen 3 3300X</b><br>AMD <b>£115</b><br>AMD has packed its Zen 2 architecture into a speedy four-core package, and that's great for gaming.                                        |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce GTX 1650 Super</b><br>Gigabyte <b>£165</b><br>The GTX 1650 Super is much more than a rebrand of the GTX 1650, securing it the budget crown.                                |
| COOLER        |   | <b>Wraith Stealth</b><br>AMD <b>Free with the CPU</b><br>Gone are the days when a stock cooler was little more than a bonus paperweight. AMD's Wraith Stealth delivers.               |
| MEMORY        |  | <b>Vengeance 8GB DDR4 (2x4GB)</b><br>Corsair <b>£40</b><br>The new norm for gaming is 16GB, but dual-channel 8GB memory is enough to get by for most.                                 |
| POWER SUPPLY  |  | <b>CX Series CX550</b><br>Corsair <b>£74</b><br>Corsair's reputation for quality PSUs precedes them. You know you're in safe hands here.                                              |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Blue SN550 500GB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£67</b><br>Just because it's a budget SSD, doesn't mean it has to be slow, as the WD SN550 proves with its speedy NVMe connectivity. |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£37</b><br>You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.  |
| CASE          |  | <b>Neos</b><br>BitFenix <b>£36</b><br>You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.                             |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>GW2280</b><br>BenQ <b>£105</b><br>A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.                                     |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>G213</b><br>Logitech <b>£40</b><br>It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.                    |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G102</b><br>Logitech <b>£35</b><br>A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.                             |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>HS35</b><br>Corsair <b>£40</b><br>This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.                      |

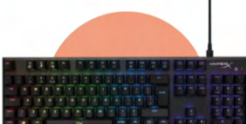


# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



**TOTAL**  
**£1,438**

|               |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B450 Tomahawk Max</b><br>MSI <b>£120</b><br>A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.                                                  |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Ryzen 5 3600X</b><br>AMD <b>£198</b><br>This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.                                                 |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed.</b><br>Nvidia <b>£369</b><br>The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.                             |
| COOLER        |   | <b>Wraith Spire</b><br>AMD <b>Free with the CPU</b><br>We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.            |
| MEMORY        |  | <b>Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB)</b><br>Crucial <b>£75</b><br>With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.                               |
| POWER SUPPLY  |  | <b>CX650M</b><br>Corsair <b>£93</b><br>The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.                                                   |
| SSD           |  | <b>S70 1TB</b><br>Addlink <b>£70</b><br>Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.                                                    |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b><br>Western Digital <b>£37</b><br>Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space. |
| CASE          |  | <b>Eclipse P400S TG</b><br>Phanteks <b>£70</b><br>An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.                       |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>AOC G2590FX</b><br>AOC <b>£173</b><br>Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.                             |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>Alloy FPS</b><br>HyperX <b>£80</b><br>As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.                                           |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>Model O-</b><br>Glorious <b>£59</b><br>Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.                               |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Blackshark V2</b><br>Razer <b>£94</b><br>The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.                                             |



# ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



**TOTAL**  
**£3,666**

|               |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi</b><br>MSI <b>£260</b><br>A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.  |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i9 10900K</b><br>Intel <b>£529</b><br>If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.                                                  |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 3080 Founders Edition</b><br>Nvidia <b>£649</b><br>The RTX 3080 is the flagship graphics card of an entire new GPU generation.                                     |
| COOLER        |   | <b>Kraken X63</b><br>NZXT <b>£123</b><br>One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.                         |
| MEMORY        |  | <b>Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200</b><br>Corsair <b>£176</b><br>If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow with RGB.                    |
| POWER SUPPLY  |  | <b>SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold</b><br>EVGA <b>£200</b><br>This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.                     |
| SSD           |  | <b>WD Black SN750 1TB</b><br>Western Digital <b>£169</b><br>Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.              |
| HDD           |  | <b>860 QVO 2TB</b><br>Samsung <b>£195</b><br>Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.                            |
| CASE          |  | <b>600C</b><br>Corsair <b>£135</b><br>If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.        |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>Nitro XV273K</b><br>Acer <b>£780</b><br>This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.                        |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>G915 Lightspeed</b><br>Logitech <b>£210</b><br>Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.                      |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G502 Lightspeed</b><br>Logitech <b>£110</b><br>With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest. |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Arctis 7 Wireless</b><br>SteelSeries <b>£130</b><br>If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.              |



# EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



The more planets you colonise, the bigger your empire can grow.

## “Establishing slipways is as simple as drawing a line between two planets”

Building a space empire in **SLIPWAYS**, one trade route at a time

**E**very strategy game or management sim I play, the same thing happens. I love it at first, but then my city, space empire, civilisation, or whatever it is grows to a certain size, and the micromanagement becomes unbearable. The joy is sucked out of the experience and I quit, destined never to finish a game.

I’ve lost count of how many abandoned empires are sitting in my Steam cloud saves, destined never to be completed. So when I heard about *Slipways*, a new strategy game that lets you build a space empire without the busywork or time investment, I felt like someone had made a game specifically for me.

ANDY KELLY



**THIS MONTH**  
Created a vast space empire in time for dinner.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Yakuza Kiwami 2*

Start a new game and you emerge from a wormhole into an unexplored, randomised galaxy. Launch probes from the wormhole and planets are revealed, which can be colonised. Each planet, depending on its biome and available natural resources, supports a different kind of industry, such as farming, robot manufacture, water production and many more.

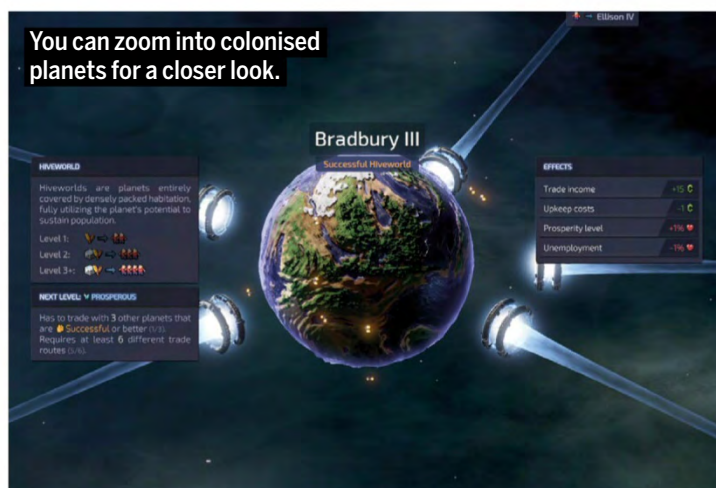
The key to building a successful space empire is connecting these

planets with slipways – think sci-fi shipping lanes – in such a way that your planets work together. An agricultural world will be able to produce a small amount of food on its own for the factories on a nearby planet, but production will speed up dramatically, and the factories will be happier, if you supply them with a steady flow of workers.

So if you’ve settled another planet in the region that produces workers, connect it to your farming world with a slipway and you’ll create a supply

**THE MAGIC OF SLIPWAYS IS HOW MUCH FUN CREATING THESE LITTLE ROUTES IS**





chain that boosts your profits and keeps the factory workers happy.

But here's where things get tricky: the planet producing the workers needs resources too. A clean water supply, perhaps. So you'll need to connect *their* world to a planet that produces water with a slipway, otherwise they'll experience a resource shortage and the happiness of your empire will suffer. And if people grow too unhappy, or you go bankrupt, it's game over.

## MILLIWAYS

But the magic of *Slipways* is how much fun creating these little routes between planets is. The game's interface is readable, snappy and simple to use, and establishing slipways is as simple as dragging a line between two planets.

Watching the slipways form, and tiny resources being beamed back and forth through them, is extremely satisfying. And not an inch of the UI is wasted, presenting all the key data in a way that allows for quick decision making.

It's one of the best-feeling games I've played in ages, with a clean, presentation and a relaxing ambient soundtrack that perfectly complements its laid back vibe. I also love that there's no combat whatsoever. This is really refreshing, and as someone who just likes building stuff, only makes me love it more. *Slipways* is out later this year, and it's worth keeping an eye on. ■



# “Learning how each one operates is vital”

Learning to love traps in **CURSE OF THE DEAD GODS**

## ▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



**THIS MONTH**  
Got killed by an 'elemental egg' and liked it.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Legends of Runeterra*,  
*Loop Hero*

**T**hese days it takes a lot for a roguelike to stand out, so it was a pleasant surprise for me this month to be so wowed by *Curse of the Dead Gods* (see our review on p82). The punchy combat, grim atmosphere, and meaningful decision-making sucked me in immediately. But one of the things that impresses me most about it is the traps.

I struggle to think of any game where I've found traps fun. Usually they're anti-fun – the thing that slows you down, or punishes you for inattention. But here they're a thrill.

As you explore the dark temples, you encounter all manner of deadly devices left behind by the architects – from electric landmines to living statues. Learning how each one operates is vital to survival.

Avoiding them is simple, in theory – each has a short animation before it goes off, giving you just enough time to dodge. But all of the game's other systems factor in to how you approach them. You only have limited stamina for dodging, for

example – which means if you run into a trap when you're out of breath, you won't be able to escape. Light is important, too – being in darkness causes you to take more damage from foes, but it also obscures traps, driving you to always be seeking out sources of illumination.

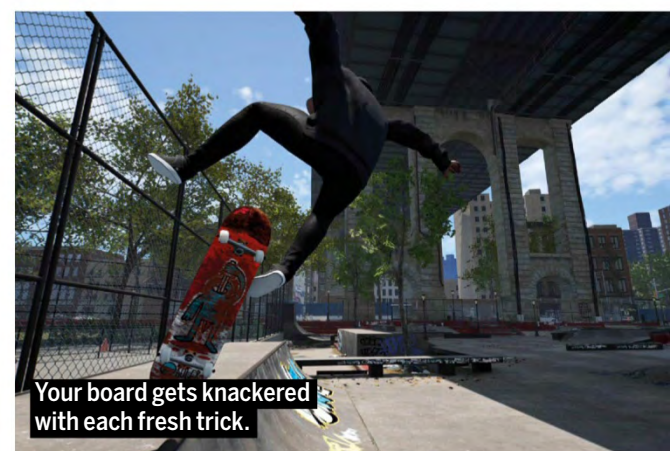
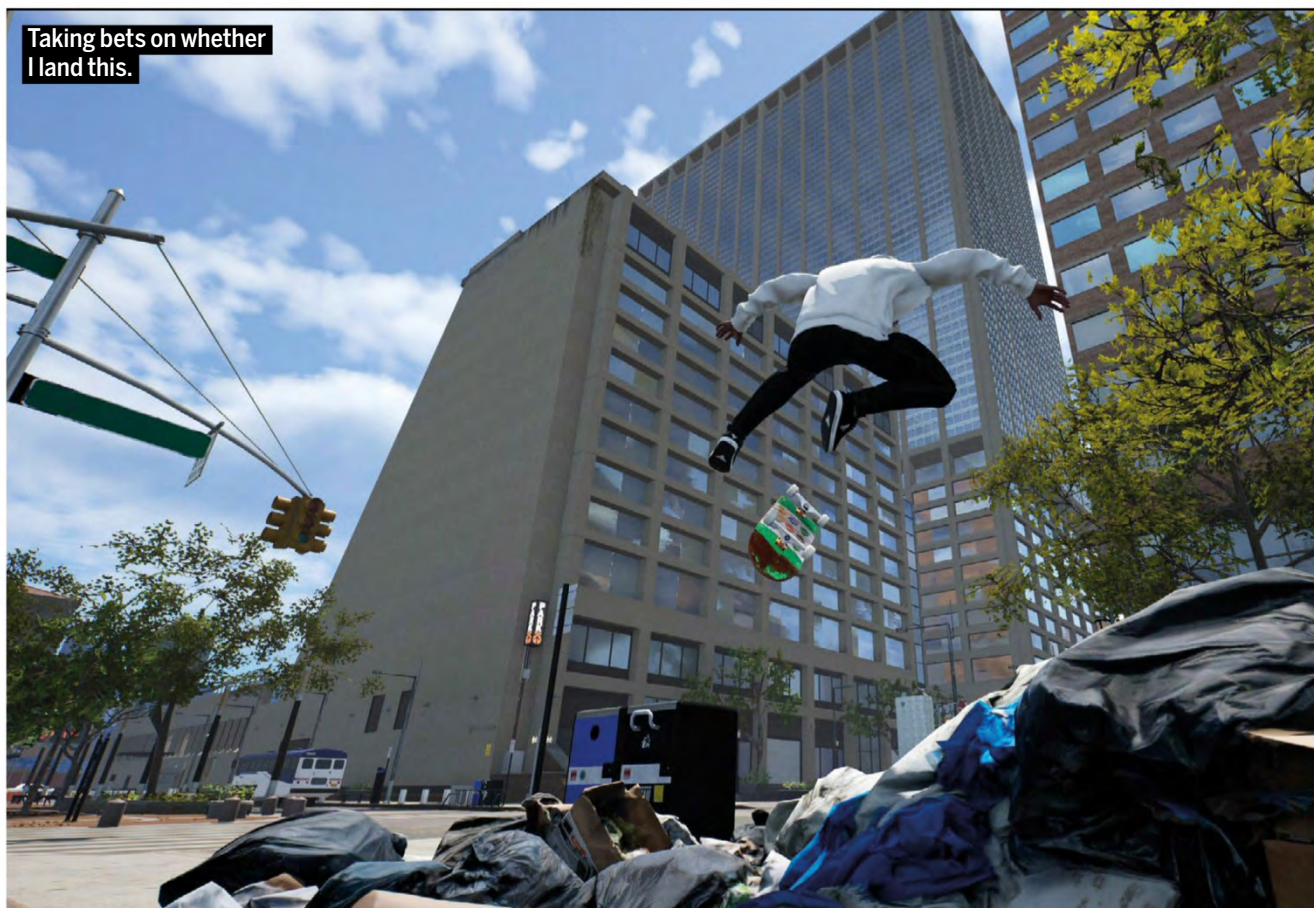
## GET OVER HERE

But they can be turned to your advantage, too. Enemies don't set them off, but they do take damage from them – and one of the items in the game allows you to recover health every time a monster is killed by one. Kiting foes doesn't just feel like some awkward way to cheese fights. It's an exciting test of your evasion and timing skills.

Traps even interact with other traps. A fire launcher might set webbed ground alight, which then reaches an explosive pot and sets it off, for example. Often these interactions are woven together into cascading gauntlets, triggered by your approach. Rather than being a nasty surprise, they're an inviting challenge, baited with gold. Can you figure out what's going to happen when you step over the threshold? How much treasure do you think you can gather as you sprint to safety?

That's the key to it – traps aren't an added annoyance, they're another layer of decisions in a game already full of them. I think for the first time ever, I don't feel hard done by when I die to spikes underfoot. ■





# “I veer off course, stumble over my feet, and send the skater careening”

Breaking virtual shins in **SESSION**

**L**ast September, I made the ill-considered decision to get into skateboarding as an adult – and not to brag, but I reckon I’ve gotten rather good at it. But while I got in a good few weeks of tearing through town while the weather held up, a Scottish winter predictably binned my plans to spend every free minute busting out sick moves. So, in the meantime, I’ve started popping a few ollies around *Session*, one of the growing number of skate-’em-ups gunning for *Skate*’s long-absent throne.

Let’s be real for a moment. *Session* is rough. After a year and a half in Early Access, the game’s still very clearly not done, with rampant physics glitches, unfinished character models, and only the most barebones structure. It’s only this year that the game stopped hilariously ragdolling you at the smallest collision. But for all its jankiness, *Session* actually gives me the same sort of dopamine rush I get whenever I throw down a board at the local park.

See, while there are some loose challenges and missions to take on, *Session* largely wants you to find your

## ▶ NATALIE CLAYTON



**THIS MONTH**  
Landed a treflip without breaking any bones.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Final Fantasy XIV Online*,  
*Halo 3*

own spots – to explore its facsimile of some iconic New York streets and skateparks and figure out how you wanna shred ’em. I spot a ramp popped in front of a trash heap with a long, gentle downwards incline leading up to it, and decide I’m gonna treflip over the garbage. It takes a good dozen or so tries – I veer off course, stumble over my own feet, and send the poor skater careening into the street after clipping a bin bag. But with enough persistence, I nail it and I feel incredible.

It’s a similar sensation to when I finally landed a 50-50 grind off the steps in town after spending an afternoon battling the trick a week

prior, or finally landing my first ollie after months of trying.

Obviously, my digital skater can pull off more tricks than my wobbly, untrained legs, so the lines are more complex – and more dangerous. I have a bash at chaining a grind into a nose-stall at the edge of a five-storey building, an act that breaks my skater’s neck ten times over. Twenty minutes later, I land it. Didn’t even have to call an ambulance.

## NOLLIE

Between spots, I get to hone my tricks with every passing curb or bench. Like *Skate*, tricks are a little more difficult to do than slamming a gamepad button, as the analogue sticks are tied to your front and back feet. It’s fiddly at first, but much like how I’ve built muscle memory for popping an ollie, I’m slowly beginning to internalise how to wrangle the sticks to form a shuvit, kickflip, or noseslide. Cruising around New York, I can see a future where I too can effortlessly flip and slide down Edinburgh’s streets.

*Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 3* pushed me to pick up a board for the first time. Now, over 20 years later, *Session* is motivating me to become a better skater. I’m down with that. ■

**MY DIGITAL SKATER CAN PULL OFF MORE TRICKS THAN MY WOBBLY, UNTRAINED LEGS**



# “Leaderboard rivalries are called ‘friendships’ in 2021”

The ennui of staring at better players’ scores in **HITMAN 3**’s leaderboards

**T**hree minutes and three seconds. That’s Phil Savage’s time in the Dubai level of *Hitman 3*. The closing chapter in IO Interactive’s trilogy only recently launched, and I’m fifth out of the seven friends I’ve accumulated on the Epic Games Store for the purposes of comparing leaderboard scores. I’ll never beat Phil’s score in Dubai. I’ll never beat former PC Gamer writer and game developer Tom Francis, either. I’m filled with shame.

My friend Dave, though, is at the bottom of the leaderboard with a score that’s around a third of mine. Ha! Good old Dave. He always knows just how to cheer me up. Leaderboard rivalries are what we call friendships in 2021.

The problem is, I’ve wiped my progress in *Hitman 3* and I’m starting again. I played the game before release, being in the privileged position that I am to receive review code, and I knocked through all the levels in story mode pretty quickly. By importing my *Hitman 2* progress, however – where I waged a leaderboard war with Phil back in

## SAMUEL ROBERTS



**THIS MONTH**  
Became a desperate version of Agent 47.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*GTA Online, Destiny 2*

2018 – my *Hitman 3* progress has been reset. And now I’m crawling back to the top, bit by bit, with every costume swap and new starting point in each level taking me closer to number one. I won’t get there. I’m too tired to be competitive in 2021.

I’m reminded of the guy in *The Wire* who gets out of jail after many years, tries to get back into drug dealing, then realises it’s become a game dominated by younger, hungrier entrepreneurs. Instead, he picks a different path and forms a youth club where kids can take up boxing. Maybe that’s what I should do instead of trying to beat Phil.

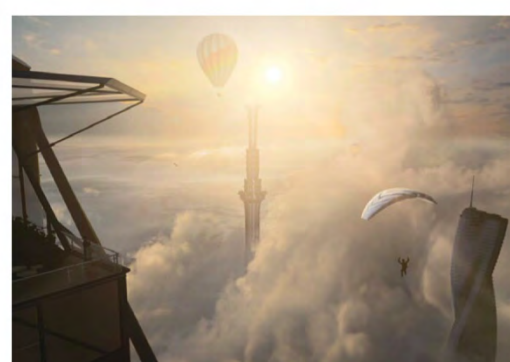
## THE LEVELS IN THIS GAME ARE GREAT, AND AMAZING IN A COUPLE OF CASES

The levels in this game are great, and amazing in a couple of cases – Dartmoor’s immersive murder mystery is dazzling the first time, and it’s a top level to try and optimise in subsequent playthroughs. Mendoza, a giant Argentina-set stage where Agent 47 can infiltrate a Bond lair-style locale which is hidden by a vineyard, is one of the best levels of the entire trilogy. It’s so big, though, that I’m struggling to get really good at bringing my time down in that one.

### HIT ME UP

That said, the magic of *Hitman* is that even its most sprawling levels seem to shrink in your mind the more you play through them. They slowly go from feeling intimidating to weirdly cosy, like locations in real life that you love revisiting.

I haven’t gotten this comfortable with *Hitman 3*’s levels yet. But I have a plan. When everyone loses interest in Agent 47 during the summer, I’ll have spent months mastering Dubai – and that’s when I’ll beat Phil’s three minutes and three seconds score, tweeting him at the dead of night with a screenshot of our times to let him know the deed has been done. How embarrassing! For me. ■







# OOBLETS

Updates introduce two new areas into the world of Oob. *By Rachel Watts*

**T**he cute critter-collecting game *Ooblets* is gradually growing in size, and since its Early Access release last July, Badgetown and its surrounding areas have developed into something bigger. With regular content updates and brand new zones to explore, players have been keeping busy with the game's two biggest updates: *Wildlands 0.6* and *Nullwhere 0.4*.

First up is the *Wildlands* update, which introduced an open forest area north of Badgetown where giant herds of ooblets frolic in the wild. A major issue that players were running into was ooblet overpopulation, and if you had been playing the game since launch like me, you more than likely had a small ooblet army distracting you from your farm work. The *Wildlands* act as an ooblet overflow area where you can drop the critters off and add them back to your farm as much as you like, without fear of facing the incredible guilt of which ooblets you'll have to permanently release into the wild due to space shortages.

The *Wildlands* also has a new fishing spot, where you can nab a bunch of resources, and the Nurny Mines which is a rocky heap where

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
July 2020

DEVELOPER  
Glumberland

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[ooblets.com](https://ooblets.com)

you can mine for nurnies, which are used for crafting. Having two new areas for gathering resources in Badgetown is incredibly handy, and gives players more opportunities to turn trash to treasure and craft to their heart's content.

You won't have access to all the *Wildlands*' opportunities straight off the bat. The mines and fishing spot are locked behind a levelling system, the first that *Ooblets* has introduced. Completing tasks on the revitalisation notice board increases the area's redevelopment progress bar, structured in levels. *Ooblets* often gives you task-ticking checklists to fill your day, but this *Wildlands* system takes an incredibly long time, and many of the tasks ask for specific ooblets and items that could take days to find and grow. It's heavily unbalanced, and for a game that has hit every mark for a chill and relaxing sim, this is the game's first misstep.

## OOKY-SPOOKY

If you need a break from Badgetown's sunshine and rainbows, Nullwhere

will be for you. The second biggest update introduced a new swamp region with dark clouds, crooked trees, and marshy ponds with plenty of creepy ooblets. The *Nullwhere* update has a short but sweet story. When first arriving in Nullwhere the region's residents are quivering in fear at the area's entrance. It turns out that they've been kicked out by a bunch of goofball kids called the Creep Cult who have taken over Nullwhere because it matches their spooky aesthetic – classic teen antics.

The Creep Cult needs to learn some manners, and you'll need to beat each member of the group in an ooblet dance-off and convince them to stop bothering Nullwhere's native residents. With only a handful of Creep Cult members, the battles are a breeze, apart from Spooky Steeve (with an extra 'e') who won't let you pass without giving him five bungle buns. The cheek!



## BEAT EACH MEMBER OF THE GROUP IN AN OOBLET DANCE-OFF

There are a handful of new crop styles and items, but my favourite feature of the *Nullwhere* update by far are the potions that can change the size of your ooblets, morphing them into being comically big or small. I started feeding my ooblet, the appropriately named Legsy, potions that would increase his size, and now he is the Goliath in my ooblet crew. This has no impact on dance battles or the story, it's just something silly that you can do for no good reason, and I love it. If you don't like the changes, you can feed your ooblet other potions to make them normal-sized again, but my giant Legsy is staying with me for life.

Both *Wildlands* and *Nullwhere* are very exciting additions to *Ooblets*, and seeing the world expand with each update just gets me more pumped for the game's full release. Glumberland isn't quite done with updates before the full game releases later this year, and the team has pencilled in two more major additions to be released in the not too distant future, with the next one being the *Port Forward* update, due out in mid-2021. ■

## TOO CUTE TO SPOOK

*Even with a Halloween edge, the Nullwhere critters remain as cute as ever*



### GLANTER

I think it's a witches hat? Doesn't matter really, still adorable.



### LICKZER

I have not thought about what Lickzer's liquid tastes like, I promise.



### NAMNAM

This is a cat that's been given way too much catnip.



### GLOOPYLONGLEGS

A gloopy blob with legs for days, it's in the name really.



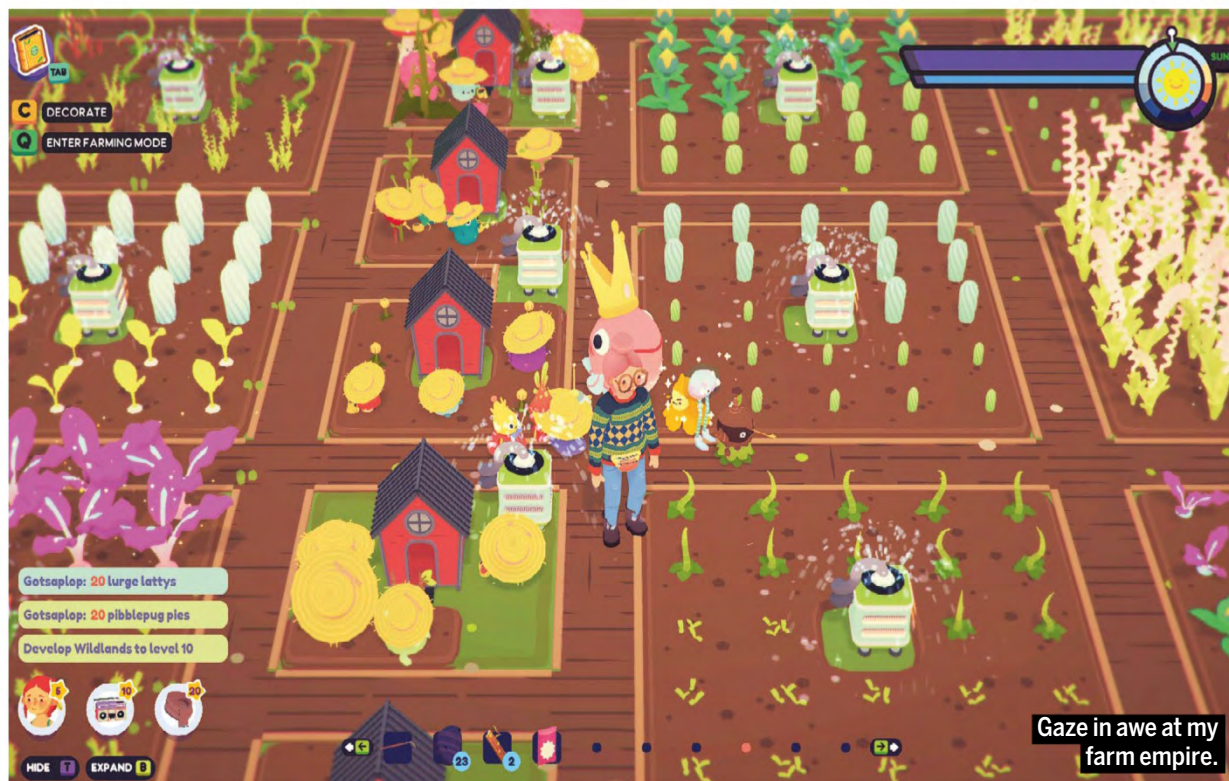
I think Badgetown has an illegal dumping problem.



The good folk of Nullwhere don't appreciate the shenanigans of spooky teens.



Gimble's balloon is the only way to travel in Ooblets.





Import Sauron's tower right into your game





# VALHEIM

Mods to make the game amazing. *By Christopher Livingston*

**Y**ou've probably been hearing a lot about *Valheim* lately, the co-op Viking survival game that's attracted millions of players just a few short weeks after it launched into Early Access. It's a survival sandbox game playable in co-op or solo, taking place in a procedurally generated (and extremely massive) open world. *Valheim* is a bit *Minecraft*, a bit *Skylrim* and a bit *Legend of Zelda*, and as scores of players have discovered, once you're a few hours in it can be hard to stop playing.

*Valheim* is already highly suitable for different playstyles. The world has one relatively peaceful biome, perfect for constructing a Viking home and spending hours refining, building and crafting with only the minor threat of occasional greydwarf raids. But other players will be pushing themselves deeper into the world and thus into more dangerous territory, clashing with trolls in the Black Forest, draugrs in the swamps, goblins on the plains, and battling *Valheim*'s bosses so they can find new resources to craft and build with. No matter what kind of Viking you are, there are mods to enhance your experience.

## FORT NIGHTS

Naturally, since so much of *Valheim*'s focus is centred around gathering materials and building a fort, a number of mods are aimed at tweaking the building system to be more robust, precise, and user friendly. *Valheim*'s vanilla building system is already pretty great, even though a quick glance at the build menu shows only a handful of building pieces. But it's more clever than it first appears, and imaginative players have been able to use the small selection of parts to build massive forts, longhouses, and they've even been recreating buildings from other games like *Skylrim* and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. There may not be all that many

## A NUMBER OF MODS ARE AIMED AT TWEAKING THE BUILDING SYSTEM TO BE MORE ROBUST

pieces to build with at this stage of Early Access, but they've still resulted in some really amazing bases.

A few mods make the building system even better. *Valheim Plus* (among tons of other features) has an advanced building mode that lets you construct your home with almost surgical precision. Instead of just snapping a piece to the grid, *Valheim Plus* lets you select the placement of each piece by finely rotating, tilting, and even raising and lowering each piece on the X, Y, and Z axis. It's easy to get the hang of, and the advanced building mode even frees you up to move your character around while building, leaving the object you're placing stuck in place. It makes it easy to check out your placement from all angles if you're trying to fit



## FAST TRAVELLER

*The various ways to get around Valheim's massive world*



### RUNNING

You'll definitely do a lot of this. And for some it's the only way to travel.



### SAILING

The sea has lots of allure (and a few monsters), so get out on the waves.



### MOUNTS

You can *probably* ride a troll. But we really wouldn't advise trying.



### PORTALS

Only problem is you need to run and sail a lot to build them.



### DYING

You'll lose all your stuff, but you'll appear back home. It's fast travel!



» an object into a tight space with clipping through anything.

Even better, there's an advanced editing mode for building. In *Valheim*, if you want to move an item you've placed, you'll need to destroy it and rebuild it, which is a bit of a hassle, especially if it's in a hard to reach spot or there's something else built on top of it. But with the editing system in *Valheim Plus*, you can now edit each item's placement even after it's been built. Is that wooden beam off its mark by a hair? Is one of your stone walls sticking out a tiny bit? Do you want to move some chests without destroying them, picking up all their contents, rebuilding them, and placing everything back inside? It's all made much simpler, and the ability to adjust everything you've built without destroying them first will no doubt have some players spending even more time labouring over the Viking home of their dreams.

Even with these new building systems, there are still restrictions—*Valheim*'s structural requirements, like having enough supports to hold up your roof or high walls, remain unchanged. But there's still much more flexibility and choice available with *Valheim Plus*.

I especially like it when a mod's name explicitly tells you what it does, and the *Craft and Build From Containers* mod does exactly that. It's also a huge convenience for any Viking who loves building – instead of having to visit your stack of storage crates and add the items you need into your inventory, it will just pull resources from any chests within range. No more overloading yourself with tons of metal bars and watching your poor Viking drip sweat while they shuffle slowly back over to the workbench or forge. As long as you've got the materials stored somewhere nearby, you're good to go and can build freely.

I can see there being a downside to this mod, if you're blissfully

building and crafting and aren't aware that you're consuming resources you'd earmarked for other purposes. So, don't get carried away. But it's a big timesaver if you've got a project that requires lots of resources.

### IMPORT DUTY

And if, like me, you're not a natural builder, no worries. I've spent hours



## YOU CAN IMPORT STRUCTURES CREATED BY OTHER PLAYERS RIGHT INTO YOUR OWN GAME

working on my home and it's still, essentially, just a crude box with a bed and a workbench. But another mod will let other people do all the design and construction for you, and you'll still be able to enjoy the results. The *AdvancedBuilding* mod means you can import entire structures created by other players right into your own game.

For instance, I was able to import a lovely, tall tower base crafted by another player, which is a big upgrade over my little home. I also borrowed a charming boathouse, a two-story tavern, and even a massive stone replication of the Eye of Sauron, perfect to intimidate the local greydwarf population. With *AdvancedBuilding*, importing and placing these buildings is simple with a single command entered into *Valheim*'s console window, and they can be removed just as easily.

If you're really looking to change things up, the *First Person View* mod might be worth a try to give you a whole new perspective. Instead of looking over your Viking's shoulder, you can peer right through their eyes in first-person. It seems like it shouldn't quite work, but it actually

does, and rather impressively. You think getting crushed by a falling tree or hammered into paste by an angry troll is fun in third-person? It's way more immersive in first.

I'm not sure how much of *Valheim* you'd really want to play in first-person view – there's a lot of running and tree-chopping and crafting that's much better in the vanilla third-person view. But this is nice for a change, and the mod doesn't lock you into first-person mode exclusively. You can use the mouse wheel to scroll into first-person and back out to third-person, so you can choose whichever view you want at any particular moment. Very nice.

Mods aren't just for singleplayer, either. If you've been playing co-op with friends, you've probably noticed that everyone has their own version of the world map. If you go off exploring, your map will show the areas you've reached but your friend's map, if they haven't been there too, will still be obscured by shadow.

### SYNC OR SWIM

Since you're sharing a world, and most likely a base, it makes sense that you'd be able to share a map, too. There are a few different mods that tackle this. *Valheim Plus*, which we mentioned earlier, has a feature that will let you share map progress with your co-op friends (if they have the mod installed), but only if you're all online at the same time. Another mod, called *Map Sync*, does something similar but it sounds a bit more immersive and fun. With the mod installed, you'll need to stand close to your friend and press F10. When you do so, your map data will be shared with them. If they press F10, their map data will be shared with you. It's almost as if you're meeting up and describing your discoveries with your friend. Pretty cool! And another mod called *ServerSideMap* does something similar, sharing everyone's map data with the entire server, so you'll have an updated map even if you're offline while your friends are playing.

Since *Valheim* is still in Early Access, and doesn't officially support mods, before you mod your game you'll definitely want to back up your world and character save files. It's also worth keeping in mind that as the game is updated, mods may become disabled or defunct. There's the possibility that all your hours spent busily working on a modded world may, at some point, be lost or become unavailable at times. We don't really know at this early stage of things, so mod at your own risk! ■

## THRIVE AND SURVIVE

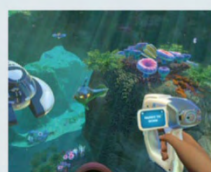
Other Early Access survival games that broke the mould



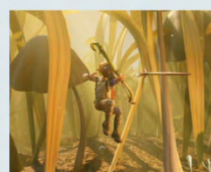
**DAYZ**  
Brutal – and broken – it shaped the genre for years to come.



**ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED**  
You could ride dinosaurs. That's hard to resist.



**SUBNAUTICA**  
A true gem and one of our favourites in the genre. Survival with a damp twist.



**GROUND**  
Beautiful and extremely promising in Early Access.



**ASTRONEER**  
Colourful interplanetary exploration done right.





I didn't (and can't) build this myself.



Mood: godlike, thanks to mods.



A few mods can be used online, if everyone installs them.





# BUILD YOUR DREAM VALHEIM HOUSE

Craft a tasteful fortress in this ferocious Norse world. *By Harry Shepherd*

### NEED TO KNOW

**DIFFICULTY**  
Easy

**TIME**  
One hour

#### VITAL LINKS

Best world seeds:  
[bit.ly/3smBH11](https://bit.ly/3smBH11)

Workbench crafting:  
[bit.ly/3u3v0IZ](https://bit.ly/3u3v0IZ)

Campfire guide:  
[bit.ly/2Zzl193](https://bit.ly/2Zzl193)

Top survival tips:  
[bit.ly/3dpmV5n](https://bit.ly/3dpmV5n)



### HAMMER TIME

**1** First, the basics. You start with a hammer and use it to build close to a workbench. Select the hammer on your hotbar and click right-mouse button to access the build menu. Use the middle-mouse button to scrap, and scroll to rotate.



### LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

**2** Save yourself plenty of bother later by ensuring your foundations are level before you start building. With the hoe – which you can craft at a workbench – you can raise and decrease the ground to make sure your components are nice and stable.



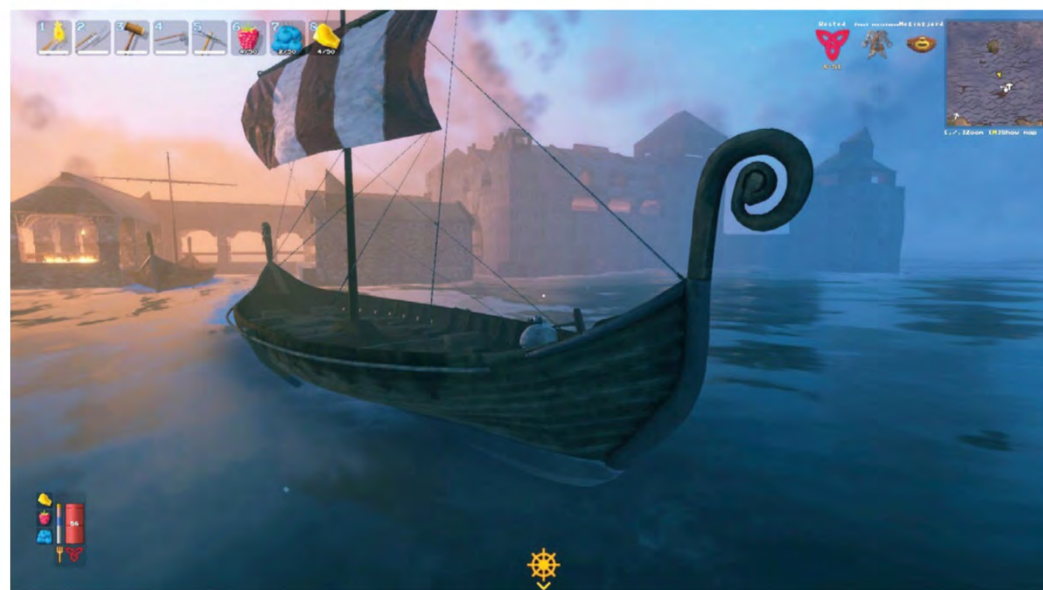
### TRIAL AND ERROR

**3** There is little consequence if you make a mistake while building: there's no resource cost. If you place a wall incorrectly or want to scrap a construction again, you'll lose no materials for doing so. Use that freedom to experiment.



### STABLE CONDITION

**4** While your creativity isn't limited by resource cost, it is by gravity; if your parts don't have enough support, they'll fall down. Hovering over a component with the hammer equipped shows its stability level.



### LOCATION

**5** Your base's location is important. Build on the coast and construct a dock so you can easily explore beyond your starter island. It's also good to be close to biomes with rarer resources, like the Black Forest.

### START SIMPLE

**6** It's easy to get overwhelmed by ridiculously impressive Reddit constructions, but don't be afraid to start small. Put together something simple to shelter your workbench and campfire to get the tools you need first.



### NO SMOKING

**7** Speaking of campfires, this'll be an early problem that'll need tackling. Your fire needs to be sheltered from the rain, but with ventilation for the smokem as it's harmful to inhale. Check out Chris' campfire guide in 'Vital Links' for more.



## WOOD YOU KINDLY? *Save time by collecting wood the easy way*



### RAISING THE STAKES

**8** Before you really give your home some TLC, make sure it's protected against invading enemies by throwing up a ring of stakes around your settlement. Note also that most wooden parts will decay in the rain or if placed in water.



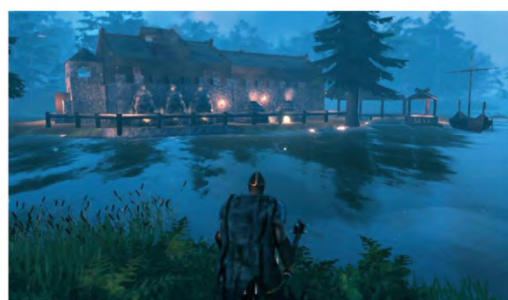
### FIXER-UPPER

**9** If your base has suffered an attack, or a downpour, check the durability of your components by hovering over them and checking its yellow health bar. Then equip the hammer, open the build menu, and left-click to repair the component.



### MILLIONAIRE'S ROW

**10** When you craft a workbench, you can only craft with it in the white circle that appears around it. However, if you want the space to craft bigger and better builds, just build more benches and you'll soon be able to build in more places.



### STONE COLD

**11** Later in the game you'll have access to more durable building parts. Once you have a pickaxe to mine iron deposits, you'll be able to use iron ingots to create a stone cutter. Then loads of sturdier components will become available.



### TEAM WORK

**12** Hit a plateau? Consider starting a server with a friend. That way you may get some inspiration from builds they've created on their world or you can have even more fun by making a whole new base from scratch together.





TRYING TO  
STAY ALIVE IN

# GTA V: CHAOS MOD

## PART II

Tugboats, dancing citizens,  
and one pissed-off Jesus. It's  
all happening in Los Santos.

*By Rick Lane*



## THE RULES

**1** Every five minutes, a random event will occur.

**2** Random events must be played through.

**3** No reloading except upon death.

**A**fter battling his way through suicidal traffic in the climax to last month's diary, I left *Grand Theft Auto V*'s Michael De Santa sunning himself by his swimming pool. It was a well-deserved reprieve from the antics of the *Chaos Mod*, which triggers random and usually ridiculous effects in *GTA*'s world at regular, player-dictated intervals.

But the gangster Michael owes money to isn't going to leave his legs unbroken for long, so it's time for the retired bank-robber to find himself a big new score. But what mischief and mayhem will the *Chaos Mod* throw at us this time around? Alien invasion? Anti-gravity?

Well, for a worryingly long time, the answer is 'none whatsoever'. I travel to the home of Michael's old friend and accomplice Lester in an entirely normal and unchaotic manner. Lester agrees to help Michael do big crimes on the condition that he scratches Lester's back first, by assassinating the head of social media platform LifeInvader, Jay Norris. Michael grabs the explosive phone Lester has prepared, drives to a nearby clothes shop to dress up like a techbro, then heads over to LifeInvader's offices.

All of this happens without anything exploding or falling on me or turning me inside-out. It gets to the point where I'm tapping on the screen as if it was a dodgy microphone. The bar at the top of the screen is definitely moving, but so far *GTA V* has been its normal, only moderately ludicrous self.

Arriving at LifeInvader's HQ, I'm let into the building by some douchey software developer who mistakes Michael for an IT guy and needs help clearing his PC of viruses. Doing some stupid dance that seems entirely in character, he tells me to follow him upstairs. I start walking, but douche-dev doesn't. He just stands there pulling his pathetic moves. Suspicious, I ascend to the second floor without him, where I discover everyone in the office is doing the dance. It isn't some weird tech-company initiation rite either. Glancing out the window, I see the entire city is jiving to the same unheard tune.

## DANCING IN THE STREETS

It's as if I've acquired the 'Dancing Peds' power-up from *Carmageddon II*. But the sudden outbreak of Saturday Night Fever at least makes it easy for me to swap the phones. As I return downstairs, I hear the sound of nearby explosions. Heading outside, I discover that my old friend the tugboat has spawned on the road, causing a screaming, flaming pile-up just outside LifeInvader's offices. I sigh with relief because the *Chaos Mod* is officially back on its bullshit.

With Norris' death arranged, Michael returns home and changes into a suit ahead of another meeting with Lester. When I get back into Michael's car, however, I discover that I cannot exit the garage. I can drive, but the *Chaos Mod* has goofed my steering, meaning I'm pinballing off the sides of the garage. Exiting the car, I

walk down to the road with the intention of stealing a different vehicle, but I'm immediately punted into the shrubbery by the bonnet of a black saloon.

Climbing to my feet, I realise that all the traffic has been set to what I can only describe as 'doughnut mode'. And I really mean all the traffic. Gazing off to

the distance, I spy a jetliner cartwheeling in the sky as if waltzing to the Blue Danube, before it disappears behind Los Santos' skyscrapers, presumably crashing somewhere downtown and resulting in hundreds of fiery deaths.

The more I play the *Chaos Mod*, the more I realise how *GTA*'s simulation often masks the initial impact of the mod's changes. Many of its effects tend to creep up on you, and you're often dealing with the consequences of them before you've fully grasped what's happening. After the meeting with Lester, I embark on a bike ride along Vespucci beach with Michael's son, and it's only when I glance down at the nearby car-park I realise the game has turned every vehicle in the city a lovely shade of blue. Later in that same mission, Michael 'rescues' his daughter from a yacht party with a bunch of drug-dealing hoods, and it's only after the ensuing jet-ski chase that I notice the *Chaos Mod* has set my character to permanently accelerate, forcing me to catapult Michael back onto the beach like an overweight missile.

I SPY A JETLINER  
CARTWHEELING IN  
THE SKY AS IF  
WALTZING

## WILD MAN

After this, the *Chaos Mod* goes dormant for a while. It's still doing stuff, like changing the weather, but nothing that radically alters how *GTA V* plays. I was hoping for some heist-related hijinks, but Michael and Franklin's first job together goes off without a hitch.

This all changes when Trevor is introduced, as if the mod understands the significance of the occasion. Within minutes of his gloriously grotty arrival, *GTA V*'s psychopathic star is off on his bloody vendetta against the biker gang The Lost. The *Chaos Mod* celebrates this event by sending every NPC in the game absolutely fucking bananas.

I first notice the change in behaviour when they start leaping





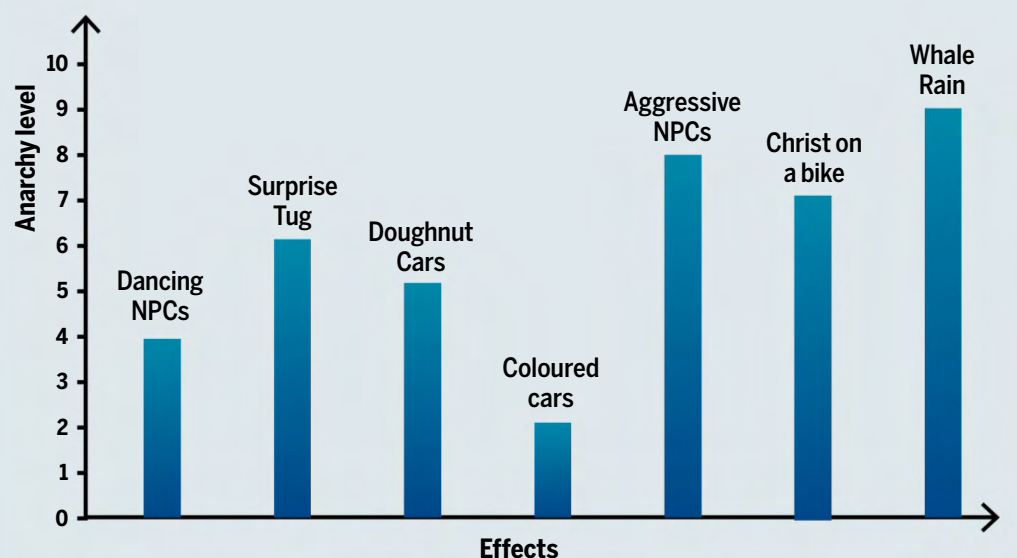
» out of their moving cars as I pass them on the road. But the new world order is fully hammered home when a random fellow lurking outside a shop in Grapeseed whips out a minigun and atomises Trevor's truck. Respawning at his trailer, I return to Grapeseed and plant a bullet between Mr Minigun's eyes before he can raise his mighty weapon. I'm walking back to the truck when a rocket hisses past Trevor's ear and blows up a car behind me. I whirl around to see that a huge battle has commenced between the town's residents, with multiple individuals closing in on me, wielding everything from police batons to assault rifles.

What follows is a blur of bullets and bombs, as war erupts on the road through Grapeseed, with ever-more cars rolling up and their drivers rushing to join the slaughter. At the height of the battle, the fire brigade shows up. But instead of dousing the flaming vehicles and immolated corpses, the fireman join the firefight, and I'm forced to put them all down. It also seems the police-response system has been temporarily disabled, as they're the only emergency service that *doesn't* show up to the fight.

Eventually, the fighting literally dies down, and I'm free to make my way to the actual mission, made extremely easy due to the vast arsenal I collected during the Grapeseed Massacre. Afterward, Trevor embarks upon various entrepreneurial endeavours to expand Trevor Phillips Enterprises, during which time the *Chaos Mod* is relatively quiet, restricting itself to changing the colours of the cars (silver this time) and making all the doors on vehicles open and close as if they're attending some sort of vehicular rave.

## THE CHAOS-0-METER

*How chaotic were the Chaos Mod's effects?*



## PLANE SAILING

The mod does pull one of its more dastardly tricks during this collection of missions, however. After a mission that involves flying a pair of planes to drop off a weapons shipment in the ocean, Trevor and his, erm, acquaintance Nervous Ron wheel them around to the nearby airport. Landing planes in *GTA V* (and indeed, reality) is not the easiest skill to master, so I'm pleased when I get the plane back on terra firma without burying it into the tarmac.

At this point, the *Chaos Mod* immediately teleports the plane to the top of a nearby mountain. So not only do I have to try to take off on the mountainside, I also have to land the plane a second time, while the other plane idles on the runway. To my own amazement, I manage both of these feats, although the second landing is less 'three-point' and more 'three falls and a submission'.

Once the future of his 'business' is secure, Trevor returns to his trailer, his attention swivelling to his pursuit of Michael, who he's just discovered is still alive. Trevor's forming plans in his trailer when, mid-cuts scene, all the physics in the game cut out, and he collapses in a pile of limbs on the floor. I'm forced to spend the next five minutes watching Trevor flop uselessly across his cockroach-ridden trailer until the effect, which is mercifully short, ceases. The next effect spawns an object behind Trevor as he clambors to his feet. Turning around, I have just enough time to exclaim "Christ on a hoverbike!" before our Lord and Saviour blows Trevor to smithereens.

Trevor respawns outside his trailer while I'm reeling from the fact that I just got nuked by Jesus. Fortunately, Christ can't get his hoverbike through the door, so I'm safe from his holy wrath. I could leave him hovering inside like an angry wasp, but something tells me Trevor wouldn't let getting decked by the Son of God go so easily. Besides 'Trevor versus Jesus' is too tantalising a grudge-match to ignore, the rural equivalent of *Alien vs Predator*.







My first plan is simply to run into the trailer and gun Jesus down, but he casually repaints the walls with Trevor's insides (I don't know what Christ is wielding, but it certainly has godlike power). After this failure, I then throw a bunch of grenades through the door, but it appears Christ is impervious to explosives. Finally, I try the same tactic, but with bullets instead of grenades. This is very effective, if anticlimactic, and soon Christ is off his hoverbike, bleeding out on the floor of Trevor's trailer. I walk in to find out what Christ was pummeling me with. Turns out it's a railgun. Never let it be said that religion doesn't get you anything. I'll be having that.

With Los Santos County now officially the devil's domain, Trevor travels to the city for his long-awaited rendezvous with Michael. The confrontation is aborted, however, with the revelation that Michael's daughter Tracey is about to embarrass herself on Los Santos' premiere reality TV show, Fame or Shame. Together, the two veteran criminals ride-out on a mission to 'rescue' Tracey. I'm thinking that now would be a good time for the *Chaos Mod* to throw in something that fits the scene, when, as if on cue, it starts raining whales.

Soon, the streets are running red with the blood of fallen humpbacks, while Michael and Trevor weave between the whales and the ensuing traffic apocalypse to reach Fame or Shame's studio. By the time we arrive, the cetacean clouds appear to have cleared up, and Michael and Trevor head inside for a little chat with Fame or Shame's host, the inimitable and incorrigible Lazlow.

### FISH FLINGERS

The chat soon turns into a chase, with Lazlow in his electric hatchback and the two stooges driving an

18-wheeler. As we exit the car-park I notice that, contrary to my initial assumption, the weather is still podding it down. The result of this is the single most absurd chase sequence I've experienced in a videogame, as I'm forced to dodge plummeting seaborne mammals in a hulking truck while trying to keep up with Lazlow's puttering go-kart. Oh also, my truck can jump, but given the broader situation this barely registers.

Somehow I evade all the falling blubber and force Lazlow into a final confrontation beside the Los Santos river, which is now filled with whale corpses. After giving Lazlow a taste of his own shame-based medicine, Trevor heads off,

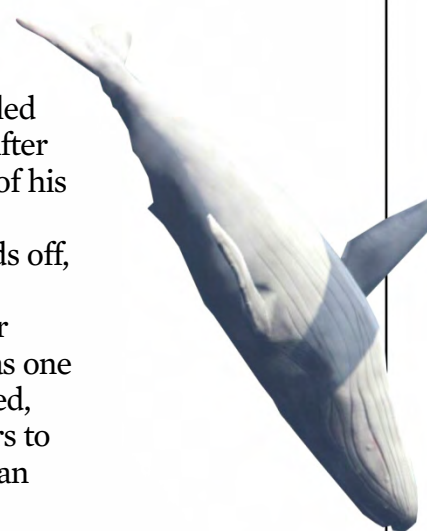
while I'm returned to the body of Michael.

With the sun setting, I'm about to return home for another afternoon by the pool. But the *Chaos Mod* has one last trick in store. As I leave the whale-strewn riverbed, Michael is suddenly teleported to inside what appears to be an airport control tower. I'm noodling around for an exit, when an alarm begins to sound. Worried now, I ascend some stairs, bumping into two men wearing camouflage sporting assault rifles.

Oh no.

I've been teleported into the military base. ■

## THE MOST ABSURD CHASE SEQUENCE I'VE EXPERIENCED IN A VIDEOGAME





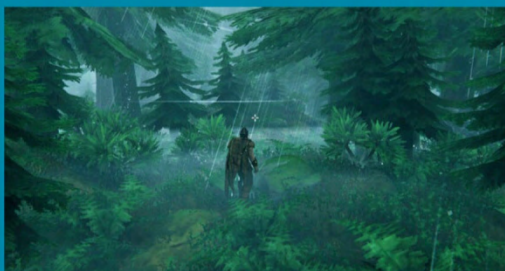


WHY I LOVE

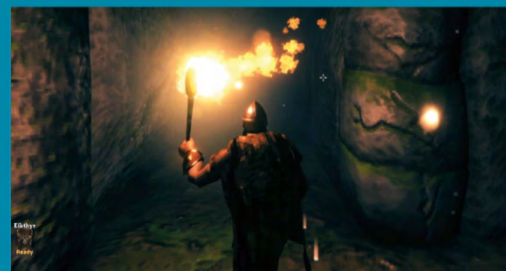
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

# THE SENSE OF MYSTERY IN VALHEIM

How Steam's latest Early Access hit nails exploration. *By Steven Messner*



**LEFT:** Gorgeous lighting is a cool contrast to *Valheim's* low-poly look.





**I**t's rare to feel a genuine sense of mystery about a PC game these days. Between overly-aggressive marketing and hyper-engaged communities, any secrets a game may hide are excavated and detailed on wikis just days after release. It makes me long for that feeling of first setting out into the frozen wilds of Dun Morogh as a level one dwarf hunter when *World of Warcraft* launched in 2004 – of being set loose in a vast, enchanting world waiting to be discovered. Thank god for *Valheim*.

The words 'Early Access survival game' might make you roll your eyes (I don't blame you), but *Valheim* is the exception. Not only does it run remarkably well, it's also an exceptionally deep survival game that's more akin to *Minecraft* than *Ark: Survival Evolved*. It's more about having epic adventures with your buds than waking up to find that a malicious group of players obliterated your entire base while you slept.

If you've played survival games, you know what to expect. You'll cut down trees, build forts, hunt wildlife, and go exploring. *Valheim* doesn't necessarily reinvent the wheel, but what's made it one of my favourite games of the past few years is how *Valheim* creates joy in the simple act of exploration and discovery.

Upon starting a new character, you're thrust into a staggeringly large, procedurally generated ocean dotted with islands. A mysterious raven named Hugin appears and acts as a tutorial system, but you're really only given one clear objective: find and slay primordial monsters scattered across the hundreds of kilometres of lush meadows, swamplands, open oceans, and craggy mountains. Right

#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASED**  
February 2, 2021

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15.50

**OUR REVIEW**  
N/A

**LINK**  
[valheimgame.com](https://www.valheimgame.com)

## VIKING VARIETY

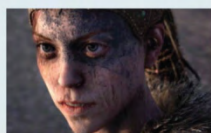
### Three other great Viking games to play



#### ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

**Our score: 92**

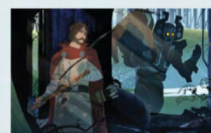
**Why it rocks:** *Valhalla* is like if *The Witcher 3* were set in medieval England. It's gorgeous, the story is full of twists and likeable characters, and the combat is bloody fun.



#### HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

**Our score: 78**

**Why it rocks:** *Hellblade* is a dark odyssey about a woman's journey into the underworld to save her lover. Play for the gruelling combat and totally engrossing story.



#### BANNER SAGA TRILOGY

**Our score: 82, 86, 90**

**Why it rocks:** Three separate games that all tell one story about a band of Viking refugees escaping the end of the world. It's like *Oregon Trail*, but the trail is infested with monsters.

now there's only five of them to find, but more will probably be added before *Valheim*'s full release.

### DUE NORSE

Each of these different biomes is home to different monsters, resources, and treasures. But *Valheim* is full of fun (and nasty) surprises. Giant trolls stalk the forest, eager to kill unprepared adventurers. Sea monsters prowl oceans, and that ominously glowing pile of branches might actually be the nest of nefarious greydwarves protected by ultra-powerful shamans with poison magic. It's a world that, when explored with a friend or two, feels like it was torn out of the notebook of a fantastic D&D dungeon master.

Last weekend, for example, I sailed my boat into an uncharted and extremely dangerous region called the Plains. Curiosity killed the cat, but what I didn't expect was to be murdered by giant, very angry mosquitos. Respawning back at home base but with my boat and valuable armour now leagues away, my friend and I had to launch a rescue operation. I thought it'd take 15 minutes or so, but after we were waylaid by a sea monster and forced to run our ship aground, it quickly

became clear that our rescue operation might require yet another rescue operation.

These moments of drama are enhanced by how staggeringly beautiful *Valheim* is. That's a weird thing to say about a game with textures and models that look more at home in a 1996 issue of *PC Gamer*, but *Valheim* is beauty in motion. It has some of the best real-time lighting I've ever seen, and when you're surrounded by its dense and dangerous forests, these tense moments take on a storybook quality.

There's a certain majesty to seeing the silhouette of a deer grazing in morning fog so dense I feel like I can taste it, and a palpable dread when you spot the glowing green eyes of a greydwarf shaman stalking you in the distance. *Valheim*'s forests are unpredictable and mysterious – stuffed full of terrifying trolls, precarious terrain and hives of monsters guarding valuable loot.

It makes the return trip to my little cottage all the more sweet. And because *Valheim* is primarily co-op, I never have to worry about unwanted guests breaking in and ruining all our

## WHAT I DIDN'T EXPECT WAS TO BE MURDERED BY GIANT, VERY ANGRY MOSQUITOS

work. I instead can focus on venturing out into the unknown world and finding resources, bringing them back to camp and figuring out how to turn them into something useful. Discovering these interactions is fun – I was very excited when I discovered greydwarf eyeballs could be used to make portals to help me easily travel *Valheim*'s vast distances.

Each day I play, I feel like I learn something new about *Valheim*'s world. But those revelations only lead to more mysteries that need to be puzzled out. Coupled with its moody and often frightening forests, and it's clear that *Valheim* is a game that knows how to do exploration right. ■



**LEFT:** *Valheim*'s forests are dangerous and moody.







Liberating carrots via song and dance. Kid stuff!

# PAJAMA SAM: NO NEED TO HIDE WHEN IT'S DARK OUTSIDE

Revisiting the adventure games we grew up on. *By James Davenport*

**I**'m not afraid of the dark. I'm not! But I am afraid of what PC gaming would look like without *Pajama Sam*. A whole generation of PC gamers grew up after the heyday of adventure games, but were too young and oblivious to notice the rapid descent of a genre. All kids knew was the computer desk, a treasure trove littered with old CDs, many of which had a game

from Humongous Entertainment tucked away somewhere. And it was scratched to hell probably, sending CD-drives into whirring, heaving fits – working nevertheless. Playable cartoons. That's what we thought of them, and *Pajama Sam's* big adventure in a surreal nighttime world hidden in his closet might've been the best of the bunch.

In *Pajama Sam: No Need to Hide When it's Dark Outside*, you take on

the role of Pajama Sam himself, finally confronting the darkness hiding away in his closet. As a kid, he's scared of the stuff, but it's not as easy as stowing away the concept of darkness into a lunchbox like Sam hopes. Once in the closet, the kid trips and falls into a Pee-Wee-Hermesque realm of darkness where everything has a face, from trees to meat grinders. After the transdimensional fall, Sam loses some key darkness banishing items, so your task is to find them and march up to the tip-top of a spooky treehouse to finish the fight off.

From here it plays like an abbreviated LucasArts point-and-click adventure, and for good reason. Ron Gilbert, of *Maniac Mansion* and *The Secret of Monkey Island* fame, teamed up with producer Shelley Day to create Humongous Games in 1992, a name contributed by none other than LucasArts cohort Tim

## NEED TO KNOW

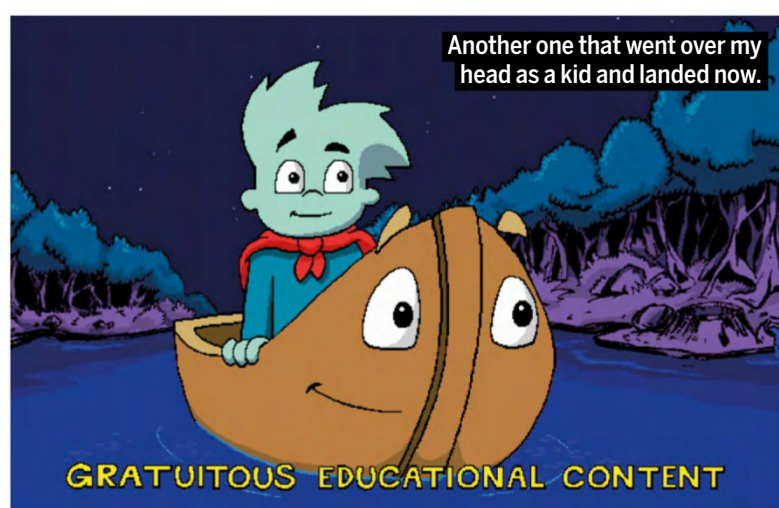
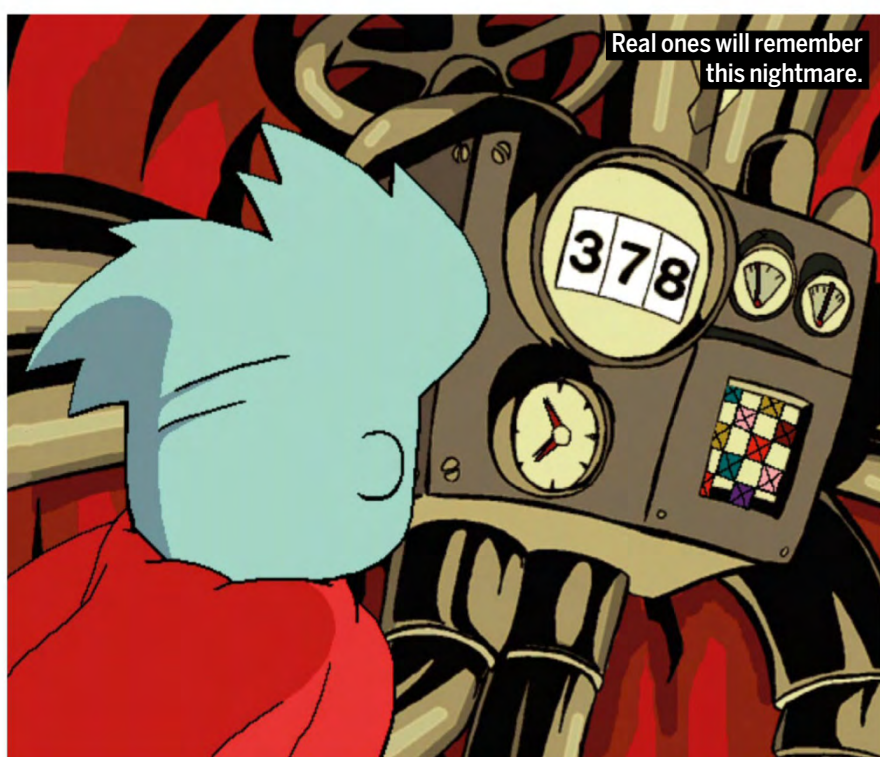
RELEASED  
1996

DEVELOPER  
Humongous Entertainment

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[humongous.com](http://humongous.com)





Schaefer. Writer of *The Secret of Monkey Island* and its sequel *LeChuck's Revenge*, Dave Grossman, came on to pen *Pajama Sam*, so it retains a familiar mix of visual gags propped up by a simpler, but equally goofy form of adventure game logic in the puzzles.

### WITHOUT A PADDLE

What I mean: to get across a river, Sam needs to convince a boat that the rumours aren't true, wood *doesn't* sink. So you fish a plank out of a creek, framed and animated so prominently in the scene that no kid would miss it, and toss it in the water near the beached boat. Its mind blown, the boat leaps into the water and offers to take Sam wherever he pleases – but the moment you leave the scene, the plank, still floating there in the foreground, quietly sinks. I barked like a dog, a joke that flew over my head years ago smacking me in the dome all these years later. That boat's going to fucking drown.

The art and animation still stand up, though I remember it looking nicer on a fuzzy CRT. They had a way of blending the low-res pixelated scenes into something that more

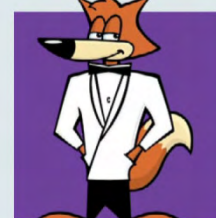
## BIG BUDS *Meet the original Humongous squad*



**FREDDY FISH**  
Banished ghosts and caught hogfish rustlers. Flipping loved solving cases.



**PUTT PUTT**  
Terrifying. First game: *Parade*. Second game: *Moon?!*



**SPY FOX**  
Aimed towards older kids, 007 parody. Peak cheese humour.



**FATTY BEAR**  
For the youngsters, a body-shamed failure. One game. Sad. Do not hug.

mirrored what I was watching on TV every Saturday morning. Even so, Sam never stiffly tiptoes between scenes. He springs up and leaps and dives, an elastic little guy with almost no repeating keyframes. An entire room of living furniture has an infinite dance party, a talking minecart takes Sam on a ride through a mountain on a physics-defying track, Sam liberates carrots from the kitchen in a cute musical number – *No Need to Hide* is lovely in motion.

*Pajama Sam* knows kids aren't going to make it through the space between narrative beats, the time in

every adventure game where you're stuck staring at an idle screen, pixel-hunting for a missed object or interactive piece of scenery. Click on nearly any part of a screen and *something* will happen. A tree root will grow a face and moan about how they didn't have videogames back in their day. A pizza will fall out of the sky onto a tennis racket. Flowers will play Patty Cake. A gorilla will appear in a smudge of darkness, whip out a banana, and have a quick snack. Sam doesn't acknowledge any of the animations, a bizarre purgatory between the reality of the player and







» the fiction taking place – but as a kid, it was a damn cartoon buffet. There are dozens of tiny, bespoke animations to stumble over on the way to the next item or clue, and nearly every one of them is funny, or just so odd you can't help but laugh. It's honestly the level of interactivity I would've welcomed in adventure games designed for any age. A simplified verb set and a reactive environment go a long way in preserving patience.

Sam's a lovable kid, too, in large part thanks to Pamela Adlon's enthused performance. You'd probably recognise the voice instantly. Adlon's also behind one of the greatest animated characters of all time: Bobby from *King of the Hill*. More recently you might've seen her on the excellent series *Better Things*, where she writes, directs and plays the lead. Coincidentally, I started watching it the same week I returned to *Pajama Sam*. An odd thing, to hear the same voice go from being scared of the dark to making jokes about going through menopause. Humongously entertaining, indeed.

*Pajama Sam* had to be. A single adventure game had to sustain four

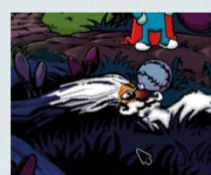
kids, minimum, for a couple weeks. I met most of my friends at Julie's, someone that kindly watched half the kids in the neighbourhood. Miraculously, she gave us free rein on the computer. We played together, bunched around the computer after school almost every day. Back at school we discussed theories in the sandbox and spouted epiphanies when our swings passed. *We should use the doorknob on the door without a doorknob!* Baby geniuses.

We never did crack the whole case on our own, stuck trying to find where to read the water meter in the mines in order to win a quiz show hosted by living doors. While *Pajama Sam* never got to rubber-with-a-pulley-in-the-middle levels of convoluted, it was still quite difficult to parse for our developing minds. Kids are pretty dumb, turns out.

The bottom dropped out when my buddy Brian's family got internet and we discovered GameFAQs. The local adventure game market crashed overnight for most of the neighbourhood. We ripped through the whole Humongous catalogue in about a week at Julie's. I lost a family that day. But I also found a new one

### CLICK TRICKS

*Odd stuff you'll see clicking around a scene*



**1 OLD MAN ROOTS**  
An old man rambles about life back in 'his day'.



**2 COOKIES N MILK**  
Cookies appear and commit suicide by milk.



**3 BASEBALL**  
Click the baseball and bat for a tiny minigame.



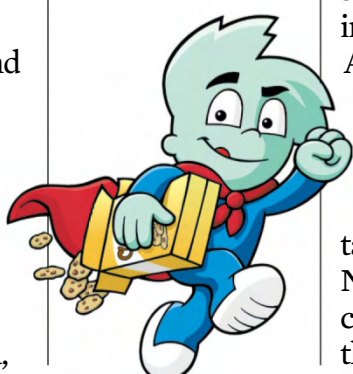


Classic LucasArts-style  
adventure game scene design.

## I CAN SLEEP IN TOTAL DARKNESS AND NOT WET THE BED ONCE ALL NIGHT

in the CD bargain bin at Staples. *The LucasArts Archive* collections probably changed a lot of lives – \$10 for *Day of the Tentacle*, *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, and a handful of other LucasArts games would do the same to anyone. Revisiting *Pajama Sam* has been a heartwarming reminder of my own PC gaming origins, and I'm sure I'm not alone here, which makes it an easy recommendation to pick up and play again no matter your age. It's a breezy two-hours for my big adult brain. Join me: humiliate the memory of your stupid kid self.

Luckily, most Humongous Entertainment games are easy to find and play today, thanks to Nightdive Studios, the studio responsible for keeping dozens of old games working on modern machines, including the upcoming remake of *System Shock*. I expected to get frustrated and bored with *Pajama Sam*, to play purely for the nostalgia,



but I was delighted throughout, even if the narrative is literally: the dark isn't that bad. Believe it or not, I've already overcome my fear of the dark. I can sleep in total darkness and not wet the bed once all night. Sure, I have to pay bills now and my brain eats itself in new ways, like fearing the death of my parents or the collapse of a state's entire infrastructure or the incoming eco-apocalypse, but *Pajama Sam* helped me nip that whole dark thing in the bud for me 25 years ago. I'm actually very grateful.

### BOTHERED BY BUGS

The only major caveat weighing down my hot air balloon ride into the past are a couple bugs present in the Steam version of *Pajama Sam*. Some scenes don't always load in crucial interactive objects properly, or at all. A late game puzzle requires Sam to find some oars in order to fish something out of the water.

They're normally propped up on a wall in a room with an organ and a talking bust, but in my instance? Nothing. No oars, even though I could climb the organ and leap on the chandelier to initiate an

interactive swinging sequence in which the oars snap into existence.

Worse, though, is that even though I could see the oars, I couldn't ever finish the swinging minigame. Sam would reach out, I would time my clicks to give him momentum, but the oars were forever just out of reach. A quick Google search confirms little game-breaking bugs like this are somewhat common, so keep that in mind before dipping back in. If it's any assurance, it's a short game already, and you can jam escape to skip literally any animation. I got back to the same sequence, unbugged, in about ten minutes.

I was adamant about seeing the game through, bugs and all, so maybe Sam's got some staying power. If you're a mother, father, uncle, aunt, babysitter – whatever, humour me. Plop a kid in front of *Pajama Sam*, see what happens. Kids are growing up with touch devices, so the point-and-click interface should be pretty easy for them to figure out. Tell them you have a new cartoon for them to play, say it's from the creators of *Baby Shark* or whatever. Lie to them. This is important. Because if they like it, *Quake* is right around the corner. ■



## RACHEL WATTS



Pulled from the fuzzy aether and jumbled junk in my brain, I present eight vital games that I think you should play. *Immediately.*



## PHASMOPHOBIA

[kineticgames.co.uk](http://kineticgames.co.uk)

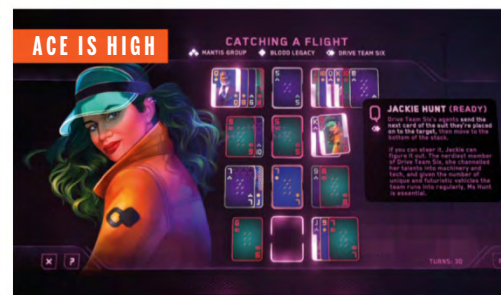
→ This is the go-to co-op game for my multiplayer squad. Our fumbling attempts trying to document paranormal activity combined with the game's slapstick jankiness are constant sources of stomach-hurting laughter. You stop chuckling quick when an angry ghoulie locks all the doors, though.



## AIRBORNE KINGDOM

[airbornekingdom.com](http://airbornekingdom.com)

→ In *Airborne Kingdom* your only enemy is gravity. It's a city builder where you control a giant flying fortress, searching for resources, expanding your city, and finding old technology all from the dizzying heights of the sky. It's a gorgeous game and gliding above the patchwork map is simply serene.



## THE SOLITAIRE CONSPIRACY

[bithellgames.com](http://bithellgames.com)

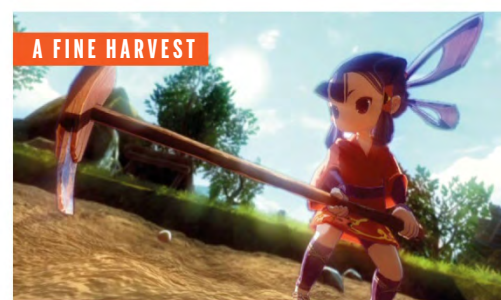
→ How Mike Bithell managed to merge solitaire with a spy thriller baffles me – it's nothing short of wizardry. Solitaire games play out as tactical missions where you control each suit as if they were a spy crew. With striking character art and a flair for drama, this is the slickest it's ever felt to play cards by yourself.



## OMORI

[omori-game.com](http://omori-game.com)

→ The newest cult horror hit to join RPGmaker's hall of fame, *Omori* is the cutest psychological RPG I've ever played. You follow a group of friends as they navigate a dream world filled with nightmarish monsters. Although it has some truly unsettling moments, it's a game with a lot of heart too.



## SAKUNA: OF RICE AND RUIN

[sakunaofriceandruin.com](http://sakunaofriceandruin.com)

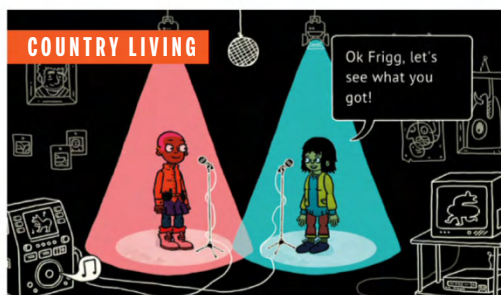
→ I never really realised how much I love farming in games until *Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin* made me plant 100 individual rice seedlings. Coupled with a monster-filled island and combo-heavy hack-and-slash combat, this is about as exciting as rice farming can get. Hold that thought, my harvest is ready...



## NECROBARISTA

[necrobarista.com](http://necrobarista.com)

→ If I died and was granted one last night in a hipster cafe, drinking coffee and dabbling in the dark necromantic arts like in *Necrobarista*, I'd be at peace with that. If you like your visual novels sweet with a hint of dark bitterness, then this is the brew for you. Now they just need to make a game like this about tea...



## WELCOME TO ELK

[welcometoelk.com](http://welcometoelk.com)

→ *Welcome to Elk* is an anthology of short anecdotes about the residents of a rural Scandinavian community. Don't be fooled by its fun paint-by-numbers art style, this is an adventure that hits a lot harder than it looks – while some of the stories are light and breezy, others are surprisingly dark and emotional.



## IF FOUND...

[dreamfeel.ie/iffound](http://dreamfeel.ie/iffound)

→ One of the most poignant coming-of-age stories of recent years, *If Found...* is a visual novel about Kasio, a young trans woman returning to her family home in a small rural Irish town. A queer story written by queer creators, *If Found...* is hard-hitting, heartbreaking, but most importantly hopeful.





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IT'S ALL OVER...

You thought the global GPU shortage was down to scalpers and crypto miners? Nope – we stole all your 3080s and SLI'd them together just so we can run *Crysis* at max settings.

Geothermally-fuelled machines harness the enormous power of the volcano itself to allow us to torrent up to 10TB of pirated anime per day.

Here in the laboratory our scientists are hard at work to develop ever more unbearable Twitter discourse, before deploying it via our network of 'Hot Take Drones'.

Here, partly lobotomised writers tap away at a stream of deliberately wrong game reviews, generating the angry comments we need to fuel our rage-powered satellite lasers.

# BAD NEWS

Step inside our secret lair

**T**urns out writing game reviews and half-baked opinion pieces doesn't pay the bills like it used to, so here at PC Gamer we've decided to pivot to super-villainy. Join us for a tour of our new office space, conveniently located inside a volcano.

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